

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 347

CS 013 356

AUTHOR Novick, Rebecca  
TITLE Learning To Read and Write: A Place To Start.  
INSTITUTION Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, OR. Child, Family, and Community Program.  
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.  
PUB DATE 1998-11-00  
NOTE 210p.  
CONTRACT RJ96006501  
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC09 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; Classroom Techniques; Early Childhood Education; \*Emergent Literacy; Instructional Materials; Language Acquisition; \*Reading Instruction; Student Development; Teaching Methods; \*Writing Instruction

## ABSTRACT

This book discusses research on learning to talk, read, and write and explores activities to support the development of these crucial competencies. The book's discussion of research is divided into two chapters: "Supporting Early Literacy: The Preschool Years" and "Supporting Early Literacy: The Primary Years." Following the two chapters on literacy development are profiles of five northwest schools, chosen because they demonstrate innovative and culturally responsive educational practices. Next, a section has materials suitable for handouts in workshops for both parents and teachers. These materials are intended to encourage those involved in designing and implementing literacy strategies and activities to engage in dialogue and reflection, activities essential for learning and teaching for understanding. Contains an approximately 250-item bibliography. (CR)

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# Learning to read and write

A place to start

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory  
Child and Family Program  
(503) 275-9581  
Fax (503) 275-9625  
<http://www.nwrel.org/cfc/>

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Appreciation is extended to the many educators and researchers who provided information and guidance in the development of this publication, especially the Northwest educators who shared their schools and classrooms. Grateful acknowledgment is given to the review panel for their valuable input: Jane Braunger, Nancy Boyer, Jane Grimstad, Jana Potter, Sharon Pottmeyer, and Bonnie Speare. In addition, appreciation is extended to Tony Kneidek for editorial review, Linda Fitch and Samantha Moores for proofreading, and Denise Crabtree for design and production.

Photography by Rick Stier, Tony Kneidek, and assorted friends and family.

Cover illustration by Rebecca Cheung, student at Harborview Elementary School in Juneau, Alaska.

This publication has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number RJ96006501. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or any other agency of the United States government.

# **Learning to read and write**

**A place to start**

November 1998

Rebecca Novick, Ph.D.

Child and Family Program

Jane Grimstad, Ph.D., Director



**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**

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# Introduction

*When learners see their own experiences as valid knowledge and use reading and writing for their own purposes, the journey toward literate behaviors is soundly under way (Dahl & Freppon, 1995).*

The first day of kindergarten is an important event in a child's development. While most children enter "real school" with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, they usually expect to enjoy school and are confident that they will be successful. However, research shows that some children's liking for school declines steadily as they progress through each grade, as does their academic self-image. Failure begins early, and by third grade, educational outcomes may already be limited (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Entwisle, 1995). During the early elementary years, learning to read is the top priority; school success depends, in large part, on how successful children are in learning to read (Boyer, 1995). As a Northwest principal stated, "Literacy is the main thrust; everything revolves around it. Without it, children can't do math, they can't function." Failing to master this critical competency in the first three years of formal schooling often has a profound effect on academic success.

But success—or failure—in learning to read does not begin in kindergarten. Research has confirmed what many parents and educators have suspected: Literacy development has a long history, beginning in the first interactions between children and their caregivers. In 1966, New Zealand educator Marie Clay coined the term "emergent literacy" to describe the literacy development of young children.

Learning to read and write, rather than mastering a series of predetermined readiness skills, begins early in life and is an ongoing process. Grounded in cognitive psychology and linguistics, the emergent literacy perspective has highlighted the importance of early experiences with oral and written language for literacy development. It is now well known that the ability to listen to and tell stories in the preschool years is strongly related to learning to read (National Reading Research Council, 1998, cited in Steinberg, 1998).



In this book, the growing body of literacy research is discussed, and its implications for educational practices in preschool and the primary grades is explored. This discussion is compatible with, and expands on, the research synthesis recently published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* (Braunger & Lewis, 1997). The authors' 13 core understandings about learning to read are summarized in Handout 1.

## Using Research to Inform Practice

It is an exciting time to be a teacher of young children. Traditionally, many early

childhood educators have provided experiences that promote early literacy—child-centered conversations, storytelling and storyreading, singing, drawing and painting, and pretend play. Research has confirmed that these activities play a critical role in both oral and written language development. Teachers no longer have to worry that reciting nursery rhymes, playing word games, and singing Raffi songs such as “I love to eat, eat, epples and benenes” are frivolous activities. Rather, they are helping children develop phonemic awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate the separate sounds in words), a prerequisite for phonics knowledge (understanding that letters stand for the sounds in spoken words) (Adams, 1990).

Reading aloud need not be seen as a frill to be engaged in only after important seat work is completed; instead, listening to stories is perhaps the most important activity for young children’s literacy development (Riley, 1994). Illustrating stories and creating stories in response to pictures help children create rich mental models; these activities are critical for children who have trouble engaging with text. In addition, Honigman and Bhavnagri (1998) point out that when children reflect on artists’ work and create their own artwork, “they develop an understanding that shape, color, and composition are elements of a language, just as the spoken and written word and nonverbal gestures are elements of a different kind of human language” (p. 211). Similarly, the link between dramatic play and storytelling and storyreading has never been more secure. Pretend play is enriched by stories of all kinds, and acting out stories can bring the written word to life—enhancing

story recall, overall intellectual performance, and social competence (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

As Braunger and Lewis (1997) point out, “We know more than we ever did about the reading process and how to teach reading” (p. 3). Yet despite great



advances in our understanding of the process of becoming literate, now more than ever the “great debate” described by Chall (1967) regarding reading instruction in the primary grades is raging: What should teachers emphasize in the earliest stages of reading—decoding or meaning?

While the debate has a long history, Pearson (1997) says that its latest version is “far sharper and more acrimonious than ever before.” Despite a call by the National Research Council (1998) to end the “reading wars,” the debate often appears to be polarized into two warring camps: advocates of “phonics first” who emphasize that learning the code is the key to learning to read, versus proponents of

whole language who view reading as primarily a meaning-making process. While phonics advocates argue that reading is primarily a matter of "getting the words and getting them right; the sense will take care of itself," whole language advocates often counter, "take care of the sense; the words will take care of themselves" (Novick, 1996).

In such a polarized climate, there is often little attempt to find common ground (Pearson, 1997). If whole language has been characterized by phonics advocates as yet another interesting fad, the phonics method, according to Diane Ravitch, an Assistant Secretary of Education in the Bush administration, has been caricatured as "involving little more than drill sheets and making funny sounds" (Steinberg, 1997). Recently, the debate has spilled out of classrooms and universities and into the political arena; increas-

**YET DESPITE GREAT ADVANCES IN OUR UNDERSTANDING** of the process of becoming literate, now more than ever the "great debate" described by Chall (1967) regarding reading instruction in the primary grades is raging: What should teachers emphasize in the earliest stages of reading, decoding or meaning?

ingly, legislatures are becoming involved in mandating the particular instructional strategies that are to be used in our nation's classrooms. Unless these mandates are based on a thorough understanding of how children learn to read and write,

they are unlikely to achieve their goal of increasing literacy among our nation's children.

The debate over early reading strategies is fueled, in part, by the widespread perception that there is a crisis in literacy. Before beginning a more indepth dis-

cussion of the research on learning to talk, read, and write, it is important to address the question of a literacy crisis.

## Is There a Crisis in Literacy?

The current debate over reading instruction has highlighted the fact that far too many children do not reach even basic levels of literacy, and far more never learn to read beyond a basic level of decoding and literal comprehension. In 1994, 60 percent of fourth-graders and 75 percent of 12th-graders scored at the "basic" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Only 30 percent scored at the "proficient" level, and the "advanced" literacy level was attained by a scant 7 percent of fourth-graders and 4 percent of 12th-graders. Moreover, the number of students who achieved the "advanced" literacy level has changed little during the 25 years of the test's administration (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).

While some educators view these figures with alarm, others point out that American students are doing better than ever before and compare favorably with other industrialized countries. For example, in 1996, on an international comparison with 31 nations, American fourth-graders were in second place and eighth-graders in eighth place (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996, cited in Bracey, 1997). So small was the difference in student scores among the top-scoring nations that both the fourth- and eighth-graders scored within 25 points of first place on a 600-point scale identical to that of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

In addition, the 90th, 95th, and 99th percentiles of American students were the highest in the world at both ages (Bracey, 1997). In historical comparisons, on all major indices, including the NAEP, the International Educational Assessment, the SAT, and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), today's students either equal or outperform previous generations (Pearson, 1997). Over the last 20 years, the greatest growth has been made by those groups of students (minorities and low-income students) who began the 20-year period farthest behind (Pearson, 1997). Based on NAEP scores, twice as many Black and Hispanic children could read proficiently in 1990 as in 1975 (Schorr, 1997). Richard Allington, Professor of Education in the Department of Reading at the University at Albany, New York, concludes that "our schools now educate larger numbers of children to higher levels of proficiency than ever before" (1994, p. 15).

Despite the generally high achievement of American children, most educators and policymakers agree that in order to compete for middle-class jobs in today's "information age," students will need advanced verbal reasoning and problem-solving skills. They must be able to use basic literacy skills, as well as higher order critical-thinking skills: to analyze, compare and contrast, follow the sequence of an argument, and synthesize complex texts. In other words, schools are now expected to educate all students to levels of proficiency that, historically, only 25 percent of students attained (Allington, 1994). During the years that the main goal of universal public schooling was to produce a well-disciplined, homogeneous, semilit-

erate work force to "man" the factories and assembly lines, education was not intended to develop critical-thinking skills and enhance multiple intelligences for the majority of children. Henry Ford summed up the needs of early 20th-century employers, "Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really want is a pair of hands?"

Meier (1995) argues that the modern public school system was designed with two tracks, one ending long before high school graduation and the other aimed at a small college-bound elite. She reports that until World War II the average American did not graduate from high school. Nonetheless, most young men were able to find unskilled, semiskilled, and even highly skilled work, with an average of nine years of schooling. "The term dropout is new—most kids hadn't dropped in before the 1940s," Meier notes (p. 69). The expectation that schools should now educate all students to high levels of proficiency has placed new pressures on schools at a time when many families are struggling to balance the demands of home and work, and when increasing poverty among young children places more children at risk for school failure. Although, as Pearson (1997) points out, "the gap between educational haves and have-nots (which is virtually identical to the gap between the rich and the poor) is narrowing," educators and policymakers agree that the gap is still far too wide.

But it is not only children from low-income families whose reading achieve-

**HENRY FORD SUMMED UP THE NEEDS** of early 20th-century employers, "Why is that I always get a whole person when all I really want is a pair of hands?"

ment does not meet the high standards of literacy demanded in the postindustrial age. In fact, as stated earlier, most test scores show that only a small percentage of children achieve an advanced literacy level, defined by the NAEP as the ability to construct new understandings by interacting within and across texts; to summarize, analyze, and evaluate; to use literacy for creative and critical thinking and for problem solving (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).



Some argue that our society is becoming increasingly aliterate. Cullinan (1987) describes an aliterate as "one who knows how to read but who doesn't choose to read." Healy (1990) points out that 80 percent of the books in this country are read by about 10 percent of the people. In addition, the number of people who read is declining steadily, as many of the upcoming generation prefer television and movies to newspapers and novels. Because a strong correlation exists between the amount of time spent reading and a person's reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, and concept knowledge, this trend bodes ill for the vast majority of our nation's children. According to Healy (1990),

"the majority of young people have difficulty understanding text above an elementary school level, drawing inferences beyond simple facts, following an author's point or the sequence of an argument, or using facts to support an argument of their own" (p. 22).

Teachers of preschool and primary school-age children are in a position to reverse this trend. By affirming, extending, and elaborating on children's oral language and emerging understanding of written language, teachers of young children can create an environment that helps all children become lifelong readers and writers. Of course, learning to read and write independently requires children to match print to sound, a skill that is often thought of as synonymous with learning to read. But we now know that learning to read and write are complex processes involving oral language, critical thinking, and the ability to make a sustained effort to read and write increasingly complex texts.

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## About This Book

In a recent report by the National Research Council (1998), the panelists concluded that everyone involved with teaching children to read should be steeped in the nuances of reading research and that they should "understand what is truly hard about learning to read, and how wide-ranging and varied are the experiences that support and facilitate reading acquisition" (p. A9). In this paper, research on learning to talk, read, and write is discussed, and activities to support the development of these crucial competencies are explored. The discussion is divid-



ed into two chapters, "Supporting Early Literacy: The Preschool Years" and "Supporting Early Literacy: The Primary Years."

Researchers have consistently found that adults, like children, need to construct their own understandings and theories. As Joyce and Calhoun (1995) point out, "staff development must not be offered as, 'Here is stuff that has been researched, so use it!'" (p. 54). Rather, effective staff development requires opportunities for discussion with colleagues, opportunities to be enriched by what Meier (1995) refers to as "the power of each other's ideas." These materials are intended to encourage those involved in designing and implementing literacy strategies and activities to engage in dialogue and reflection, activities essential for learning and teaching for understanding. Joanne Yatvin, a Northwest principal, advises, "Good teachers continually look at their students, their own experiences and beliefs, and what is possible in their classrooms. They respect research for its insights and direction, but they are not enslaved to it" (p. D9).

Following the two chapters on literacy development are profiles of five northwest schools. These schools were chosen because they demonstrate innovative and culturally responsive educational practices, and they take active steps toward comprehensive, family-centered approaches to meet the needs of young children. Because they are committed to a philosophy of education based on both teaching for understanding and learning as understanding, staff development activities emphasize

individual and collective inquiry into best practice. These snapshots are intended to tie theory with practice in the real world. The profiles are the result of site visits that included classroom observations, document review, and interviews with teachers and principals. With the exception of Helen Gordon Child Development Center, the sites were profiled more extensively in *Successful Early Childhood Education in an Imperfect World* (Novick, 1996). The sites are:

- Helen Gordon Child Development Center in Portland, Oregon
- Helen Baller Elementary School in Camas, Washington
- Cherry Valley Elementary School in Polson, Montana
- Harborview/Capital Elementary School in Juneau, Alaska
- Mary Harrison Elementary School in Toledo, Oregon

Next, a section with materials suitable for hand-

outs in workshops for both parents and teachers is included. These handouts include brief synopses of a concept, summaries of research, and suggestions for designing learning experiences for young children.

Finally, an extensive bibliography following the handouts provides references for more indepth study.

**BY AFFIRMING, EXTENDING, AND ELABORATING** on children's oral language and emerging understanding of written language, teachers of young children can create an environment that helps all children become lifelong readers and writers.

# Supporting Early Literacy: The Preschool Years

*Word meanings are inherently social and with development become personalized, as the child comes to "possess" them as his or her own (Vygotsky, 1978).*

*Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are streams that flow into the same pool; they are constantly refreshing each other (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).*

“**L**iteracy begins at birth” has become a popular adage among early childhood educators. The expression draws attention to the fact that children who live in homes that value books and the written word learn to read earlier and more easily than children whose families do not provide such an environment. Researchers have found that extensive story-reading experiences during the preschool years is strongly correlated with successful literacy development during the elementary school years (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995; Schickedanz, 1986; Wells, 1986). The U.S. Department of Education report *Strong Families, Strong Schools* concluded that the single most important parental activity for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children (Riley, 1994).

But it is not only through books that caregivers encourage children's literacy. Researchers agree that oral language provides the cornerstone of written language; speaking, listening, reading, and writing are all aspects of literacy. They develop in an interdependent manner, each informing and transforming the other (Strickland, 1990). For example, proficiency in

oral language is strongly correlated with later reading proficiency. Reading and being read to build vocabulary, concept knowledge, listening, and critical-thinking skills. Writing enhances phonemic awareness (awareness of the separate sounds in words) and word recognition; in turn, reading improves writing (Sweet, 1993).

In addition to reading books to children, how do caregivers create an environment that promotes the infant's and young child's literacy development? Don't run out and buy flash cards for the toddlers in your care or lecture the four-year-olds, advise child-development experts. In *Rethinking the Brain*, Rima Shore of the Families and Work Institute (1997) sums up what we have learned from neuroscientists, developmental psychologists, and early childhood educators about how young children learn:

Children learn in the context of important relationships. The best way to help very young children grow into curious, confident, able learners is to give them warm, consistent care so that they can form secure attachments to those who care for them. Paying attention to an infant's moods, knowing when he needs comfort rather than stimulation (or vice versa), mimicking a baby's trills and “beebiebees,” or following a toddler's lead as she invents a new version of peek-a-boo—these interactions are all part of responsive care, and do far more to boost later learning than, say, flash cards or tapes of the ABCs (p. 29).

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Sensitive, responsive, loving care is really all that infants need to grow and thrive. For toddlers and preschoolers, caregivers support children's emergent literacy by providing many different kinds of opportunities and encouragement for children to speak, hear, read, write, view, think, and explore (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.). What does responsive care look like? And how does the infant, who comes into the world with only the cry to communicate her needs, become the toddler who loudly proclaims, "Me do it?" How does the toddler become the three-year-old who tells complex stories about a recent experience, and (only a year later) become the four-year-old who writes pretend messages and reads books that she has memorized? These are some of the questions explored in this paper.



structure," in the mind. In order to become competent language speakers, children needed only to be exposed to language. No particular effort on the part of caregivers to facilitate language development was considered necessary (Bruner, 1983). As psychologist George Miller put it, "We now had two theories of language development, one of them, empiricist associationism, was impossible; the other, nativism, was miraculous" (cited in Bruner, 1983, p. 34).

In recent years, a broad-based approach, usually referred to as the "interactionist perspective," has emerged as the most influential theory in the field (see Handout 2). Its basic premise is that at birth, infants are psychologically prepared to learn to talk and learn to do so within the context of reciprocal, social interactions with caregivers. Although linguists are divided about supporting Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, recent research by Cornell University psycholinguist Barbara Lust has provided new evidence for the idea that humans are biologically programmed for a language faculty that guides language development. Based on a data base of samples from 800 to 1,000 young children representing 16 different languages, the research "provides new and

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## Language Development

Discovering how children learn language has fascinated generations of philosophers and linguists. The late William Burroughs proposed that language is a virus from outer space. Two somewhat less inventive, but more comprehensive, theories of language development were proposed during the first half of this century. The behaviorist, or empiricist associationism learning theory, delineated by B.F. Skinner in *Verbal Behavior*, conceived of language as "just another set of responses," that were learned by associating words with their meanings; learning was aided by imitating a model and being reinforced for correct responses.

In contrast, Noam Chomsky's hypothesis, based on nativism, proposed a universal grammar, or innate "linguistic deep



compelling evidence that kids don't just copy-cat their language but are born with the ability to 'crack the codes' of their language through structural analysis. Specifically, they early can figure out their language's system of word meaning, sentence structure, and sounds (semantics, syntax, and phonology)" (Lang, 1998, p. 2).

The infant is no longer regarded as passive, responding only to stimuli; research is now verifying what mothers and fathers have always known: From birth, the infant is profoundly social. Research has shown preferences of the newborn infant for a human facelike gestalt, a feminine voice, and maternal odor (Fantz, 1963). An infant can remember and respond differently to the smell, voice, and face of the mother as early

impressions. They recognize patterns and are interested in shapes, and they remember what they have heard and what they have felt. Babies, in short, are smarter, more competent, more curious and eager than ever was suspected."

### **Conversations in the Nursery**

A study by DeCasper (cited in Associated Press, 1992) demonstrated that infants hear the mother's voice and are aware of varying intonations in speech before birth. In this study, several mothers read to their in-utero infants, each reciting a different Dr. Seuss story. At three days old, when they were read several stories, the infants preferred the story that had been read to them before birth. The infant, then, is born with an ear for the rhythms of language and an innate need for interpersonal relatedness (Emde, 1987).

In turn, caregivers are predisposed to respond to "babyiness" or "cuteness" with a number of behaviors that appear to be innate and universal. In a paper, "Baby Talk in Six Languages," Ferguson found that all mothers spoke their version of baby talk (often called "parentese") to their infants (Stern, 1977). In all cases, mothers used short repetitive utterances with long pauses in between them, many nonsense sounds, and certain transformations of sounds that had some common features; for example, pretty rabbit became *pwitty wabbit*. In addition, mothers used a higher pitched voice, varied the pitch a great deal, and stretched out vowels; all of these variations were accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions, designed to capture the infant's attention.

A recent study of parents and infant interactions in three countries reveals a



as the first few days of life. At the White House Conference on Early Childhood and Learning, Dr. Donald Cohen, Director of the Yale Child Studies Center, commented: "Infants see and hear and taste, and they try actively to make sense of these

rhyme and reason to baby talk; the speech patterns that caregivers use in speaking to their infants are perfectly suited to the infant's developing neural system. According to Kuhl, chair of the Speech and Hearing Sciences at the University of Washington, "the sing-song, drawn-out, exaggerated form of speech has a melody to it. Inside the melody is a tutorial for the baby that contains exceptionally well-informed versions of the building blocks of language" (Kuhl, 1997).

Thus, both the infant and caregiver make important contributions to what researchers agree is the *most important milestone in children's cognitive development—the development of language*. As stated earlier, these early interactions and experiences don't just create a context for early development and learning, they directly affect the way the brain is wired. New research shows that much of the wiring of the brain's neurons comes after birth and depends on the experiences infants and young children have. Fully three-quarters of the human brain develops outside the womb, in direct relationship with the physical and social environment (Shore, 1997).

The warm responsive care—touching, rocking, holding, talking, smiling, singing—that is essential for emotional development is also crucial for cognitive and language development. Emde (1987) points out that emotional signals, such as crying and later smiling, serve as the language of the baby. A caregiver who responds sensitively to the infant's cues helps the infant to develop "confidence in his own ability to control what happens to him" (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972). In a study by Bell and Ainsworth (1972), babies whose mothers

had been most responsive to crying during the early months tended to cry least in the last months of their first year. Instead, these infants tended to rely more on facial expressions, gesture, and vocal expressions to communicate their intentions and wishes to mother. Gunnar (1996) has shown that by three months of age, children who have received consistent, warm, and responsive care produce less of the stress hormone cortisol, and when they do become upset, they turn off their stress reaction more quickly.



Language development begins with mutual eye contact and reciprocal smiling. During these early caregiver-child interactions, social routines are first established and the basic rules of human interaction are learned (Bruner, 1983). Parents direct a large proportion of their responses to infants in the form of questions and pause for an imagined answer before speaking again. For example, a

## THE BABY LEARNS THAT WHEN HE IMITATES

this ridiculous thing we do of moving our mouths and making noise, he gets exactly what he wants—amusement and social interaction. It's the first proof of the power of words" (Snow, in Patlak, 1993).

mother might say, "Would you like to take a bath?" After a suitable pause, she might answer, "I thought so, you love your bath." Stern (1977) points out that the infant is being

taught how to take speaking turns that normal conversational exchange requires.

Videotapes made by Scottish researchers reveal that two-month-old babies already carry on rudimentary "conversations" with their mothers. Typically a mother will say something to the baby and the infant will coo or move his arms. The mother might repeat the child's cooing sounds. Or the mother will smile and the baby will smile back. At two months, these infants are already able to wait their turn and pay attention to another person—critical conversation skills (Patlak, 1993).

Although Stern (1977) found these types of conversational patterns much of the time in the infant/mother dyads he studied, a more common conversational style during play was that mother and infant were taking turns but were vocalizing in unison, while locked in a prolonged mutual gaze. "Vocalizing in unison was more likely to occur as the interaction became more lively and engaging. It seems to serve more as a bonding function than as an exchange of information" (p. 18).

By the age of six months babies begin babbling—producing sequences of simple syllables that are the sounds we use when we talk. The universal nature of babbling is attested to by the fact that in many languages, names for fathers and mothers

come from some of the first syllables that all infants produce: *dadada*, *papapa*, and *mamama*. When caregivers imitate these sounds in a playful way, infants gain valuable feedback on these early vocalizations, essential building blocks of language. Catherine Snow, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University, observes, "The baby learns that when he imitates this ridiculous thing we do of moving our mouths and making noise, he gets exactly what he wants—amusement and social interaction. It's the first proof of the power of words" (cited in Patlak, 1993).

This feedback also helps infants move from, in Kuhl's words, "citizens of the world status" to a "culture-bound language specialist status." Numerous studies in several countries have shown that at birth, infants across the world can discriminate all of the sound contrasts that are used in any language of the world. But by six months, babies are already focused on the particular language sounds that their language uses rather than the sound of all languages. According to Kuhl, "What this research is showing is that by six months of age, infants' perceptual systems have been altered simply by listening to us speak" (Kuhl, 1997).

**What's in a point?** Many playful and mutually enjoyable face-to-face interactions are critical for the development of the infant. Toward the end of the first year of life, Stern (1977) notes that "the infant's love affair with the human face and voice and touch is partially replaced by a consuming interest in objects to reach for, grasp, and manipulate" (p. 39). Bruner (1983) suggests that it is the infant's success in achieving joint atten-

tion (on an object, person, or event) with caregivers that leads him or her into language. During the infant's first months, mothers follow the child's gaze and comment on what she appears to be observing. By four months, though, most infants can follow an observer's line of regard. Later, babies will follow the caregiver's pointed finger directed at an object some distance away or to pictures in a book.

Franco and Butterworth (1997) found that the age at which a baby first points is a good predictor of his progress in understanding language. Babies typically first point in the same week they begin to understand names for objects, such as *cat* and *ball*. Canioni (cited in Franco and Butterworth) has found that the earlier babies begin to point, the more words they know at 20 months of age. The authors conclude that pointing is more than a means of reorienting someone else's attention; it is a crucial step on the road to language. But, as Bruner (1983) notes, "There is a long road between following another's gaze out to an object (or pointing at one) and being able to comprehend a referring expression like, 'the cream cheese on the top shelf of the fridge.'" Although many of the specifics of language acquisition remain elusive, researchers have identified critical features of an environment that supports early language learning.

### **An Optimal Language-Learning Environment**

Clearly, baby's first words have a long history, a history that begins even before birth, as the DeCasper study shows. Before infants utter their first words toward the end of the first year, they are well on their

way to mapping the sound structure of their particular language (Kuhl, 1997).

They are able to:

- Secure the attention of another through gesturing or pointing
- Sustain joint attention
- Take conversational turns
- Engage in goal-directed action, such as purposefully dropping a toy in a bath to create a splash
- Focus on the particular language sounds that their language uses rather than the sound of all languages
- Produce simple syllables, known as babbling
- Understand the meaning of many words, perhaps as many as 100

The optimal environment for stimulating language development is one of responsiveness to and acceptance of the child's communicative attempts (see Handout 3). Parents help children to become confident and competent language learners when they respond to an infant's babbles, coos, and smiles as if they are meaningful and when they include children in conversations long before they say their first words. Dore (1986) suggests, "Perhaps the single most important aspect of conversational feedback for the initial acquisition of language is the adult's attribution of intentionality to infant vocalizations" (p. 345).

Of course, infants and young children are learning far more than language and other cognitive skills in their early years. Through interactions with significant caregivers and, later, peers, infants and young

**THE OPTIMAL ENVIRONMENT**  
for stimulating language development is one of responsiveness to and acceptance of the child's communicative attempts.

children develop not only language and other skills, but also a sense of self-efficacy. According to Vygotsky, word meanings are inherently social and, with development, become personalized as the child comes to "possess" them as his or her own



(Nelson, 1985). A conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* illustrates this concept:

"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty, "it means just what I want it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "if you can make a word mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all" (1946, p. 47).

Undoubtedly, Humpty Dumpty represents an extreme case; however, the role of negotiation in language development appears to be well established (Bruner, 1983; Nelson, 1985). Bruner points out that in early language exchanges, mothers

typically operate on the assumption that "no speaker is entirely ignorant." Although frequently they do not know what their children are trying to communicate, or whether their own speech has been understood by their children, "they are prepared to negotiate in the tacit belief that something comprehensible can be established" (1983, p. 86). Described variously as intersubjectivity (Trevvarthen & Hubley, 1978), "jointly created little worlds" (Bruner, 1986), interfacing of minds (Bretherton, 1988), and developing a "mutual faith in a shared world" (Rommetveit, 1972, cited in Emde, 1987), this shared meaning appears to be a prerequisite for meaningful exchange.

The following exchange reported by Bruner (1983, p. 87) between 23-month-old Richard and his mother provides an example of the importance of negotiation for the development of shared meaning. He and his mother are examining a coin together:

Richard: (*points to picture of the Queen on coin*) Nanny, nanny.

Mother: What? That's not Granny. It's a lady, yes. Nini is a lady, isn't it?

Richard: (*points to coin again*) Nanny, nanny.

Mother: You think it's Granny? Oh well, I don't think she'd mind too much.

Richard: (*with smile to mother*) Layly.

Mother: Queen.

Richard: Nanny, nanny.

Mother: It's not.

Richard: (*smiles and nods*) Nini.

Mother: Yes. Have they all got ladies on?

Richard: (*points*) Nanny, nanny.

Mother: No, it isn't.

Richard: Nini.

It is clear that in acquiring language, children are not simply mastering or cracking a code; rather they are using language to make sense of their world. Bruner observes:

And so Richard is on his way to distinguishing Granny from the Queen and both from generic ladies. Note that this negotiation has been going on for a long while. At 18 months, *nini* and *nanny* were both indicators for juice. At 20 months, *eeni* was for lemon and *nana* was used to indicate "nothing there" when something was expected. At the time of this example, *nana* may be money and *nini* lady, and there is still much sorting out to be done. By 23 months, for example, *nini* disappears and at 24 months, Richard says, "There's a lady" (p. 88).

having learned to expect that a word following an *a* is a noun (*a* book, *a* cat), toddlers may become confused when unsuspecting adults use words such as *annoying* or *adorable*. When a two-year-old's grandmother told him, "You are adorable," he responded indignantly, "I am not a doorbell, I am a good little boy." Admonitions to "Be nice, be quiet, and be good" led one toddler to respond to the command "Behave!" with a loud protest, "I *am* being *have*."



**The beginnings of grammar.** Toward the end of the second year, toddlers reach another milestone in language development—they begin to put two words together. This accomplishment demonstrates the toddler's growing awareness of relationships between objects and events. The way he orders his words and the inflection he uses shows that he is beginning to understand some of the rules of grammar. For example, "All gone juice" is a statement of fact: The juice is all gone. But "Juice all gone?" is a request for information.

At this time, toddlers are also learning a limited set of rules about grammatical forms, and they may create new words by overgeneralizing rules for plurals and past tense. The speech of young children is often peppered with *foots*, *deers*, *gooses*, *mices*, *goed*, *comed*, and *bited*. Similarly,

Although caregivers may be tempted to correct these early mistakes, these overgeneralizations are a result of the brain's innate search for patterns and rules. According to Cazden (1981), "These incorrect generalizations of tacitly discovered rules for the formation of words are active-



ly constructed in children's minds as an oversimplification of the structure of the language they hear" (p. 4). Because they are the child's best attempt at making sense of her experience, they are highly resistant to adult correction. Cazden provides this example, originally reported by McNeil. The conversation took place when a psychologist tried to correct an immaturity in her daughter's speech (p. 5):

- Child: Nobody don't likes me.  
 Mother: No, say, "Nobody likes me."  
 Child: Nobody don't likes me.  
*(Eight repetitions of this dialogue)*  
 Mother: No, now listen carefully,  
 say, "Nobody likes me."  
 Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

Aside from what the child is learning about her mother's disregard for her emotional well-being, the lesson in grammar is clearly counterproductive. Children whose speech is constantly corrected may learn that it is better not to speak at all. An optimal language-learning environment—one that promotes both language acquisition and a positive sense of self—allows children to take responsibility for their own learning. Brian Cambourne, Head of the Center for Studies in Literacy at Wollongong University in Australia, points out that parents never say, "Our pride and joy has not learned the passive/negative transformation yet. So for the next five weeks we'll teach him that. Then we'd better get onto the embeddings involving relativism and adverbial conjoiners" (1987, p. 7). Nor, in his three-year study of parent-child interactions, did parents expect their children to use the correct form as soon as they heard it:

They knew that "baby" talk may persist for weeks, that *goed* and *comed* and other immature attempts at communication would continue until the child decided to change. No exasperated pressure of the kind: "Look, I've modeled the auxiliary a dozen times now—when will you get it right?" was ever given (p. 8).

Instead, caregivers of children who are confident oral language learners interpret their children's communicative attempts as meaningful, expand on their utterances, and treat them as competent conversationalists, long before children say their first recognizable words. They provide a language-rich environment, where "meaningful spoken language washes over and surrounds children" (Cambourne, 1987, p. 6), from birth and even before. Rather than serving as reinforcer and corrector, adults, in Bruner's words, act as "providers, expanders, and idealizers" of language.

For example, a caregiver might say to a toddler who is looking at a dog, "That's a big dog, isn't it?" (*providing* language). When a child says, "truck," the adult might *expand* on the child's utterance by saying, "Yes, that's a green truck. It's going fast." And a caregiver *idealizes* the child's language when he accepts the child's attempt at saying a word or phrase and rephrases it. For example, a child who says "ba," while pointing to his bottle might be told, "Oh, you want your bottle? Here it is." Communication between families and child-care providers regarding children's new words and particular pronunciations can help everyone understand and expand on children's communicative attempts. For example, the following sentence spoken by a

toddler would be quite incomprehensible unless his caregivers knew that he substituted *h* for *s* and *ck* for *v*. “Hicky go hide he hoo,” is then understood to be an important announcement of purpose: “Stevie go outside, see Sue.”

In sum, an optimal language-learning environment is provided by caregivers who (Snow, Dubber, & Blauw, 1982):

- Know their children well and interpret communicative attempts as meaningful
- Accept and value behavior that children are able to do
- Are highly responsive to children’s interests
- Provide opportunities for children to exercise control over activities
- Provide activities and interactions that are developmentally appropriate

Research on young children’s emergent literacy supports the view that the underlying process of learning written and oral language is the same: Like oral language, written language is best learned through meaningful activities in a social context (see Handout 4). What are some of the activities that caregivers of young children can provide to help young children become competent language speakers, listeners, readers, and writers?

## Activities to Support Emergent Literacy

*“It is the intimate sharing of a book between a child and a caring adult that helps the child grow to love and bond with books” (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).*

## Singing and Poetry

Infants are biologically primed to respond to the human voice, its rhythms and melody. Infants and young children love to rock, walk, dance, and bounce to the steady beat of a nursery rhyme; they are soothed by the soft sounds of a lullaby. While there are, of course, many wonderful songs written for infants and young children, making up songs using children’s names to fit a particular occasion can be particularly soothing and pleasurable. Honig (1995) observes, “When a baby hears his own name repeated over and over in the phrases of a song, he feels that he is in a place where people know his needs and can comfort him.” What better way to give pleasure to an infant, toddler, or preschooler, to ease transition and separation anxieties, increase closeness between caregivers and children, and awaken early humor than to sing to (and with) them (Honig, 1995)?

And all the while, singing boosts early language skills, enhances memory and listening skills, and increases attention span (see Handout 5). Song picture books provide a natural bridge between art, music, literature, and language. According to Jalongo and Ribblett (1997), these books support literacy by:

- Building on familiarity and enjoyment
- Providing repetition and predictability
- Expanding vocabulary and knowledge of story structures
- Promoting critical thinking and problem solving
- Fostering creative expression and language play

Poetry and songs are fun to memorize and can last a lifetime. Unusual vocabulary and complex word structures are



often taken in stride when they appear in songs and poetry. Of course, children don't always know exactly what all the words mean; cross-eyed bears named Gladly (from the hymn *Gladly My Cross I'd Bear*) and other misnomers are common among two-year-olds. But playing and experimenting with language can lead to expanded vocabulary and to creative use of lan-

After listening to authors such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, four-year-olds in her study were invited to dictate their own stories in response. In their stories, they incorporated the styles used by these authors. Children who are exposed to poetry, songs, and stories not only have enhanced language skills, but often become quite creative in their use of language.

Engel (1996/97) tells the story of a three-year-old child who is painting a watercolor picture:

Her mother asks her if she would like to write anything to go with her picture. The young painter nods immediately and dictates, "The guy who went up the steep nicken and

then he fell down and hurt his nicken on the schnoks and the nicks" (p. 7).

Engel notes that for this child, the process of making up words and creating alliterations is as important as the content of the story.

Accompanying songs and poems with body motions, dance, and finger play aids large and small muscle development and helps children integrate language, social, cognitive, and physical competencies. Research has shown that the right and left hemispheres of the brain can be stimulated to work more efficiently together



guage—rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. The ability to hear and use these aspects of language is strongly correlated with learning to read. In particular, children develop phonemic awareness as a result of the oral and written language they are exposed to during their preschool years. Books and songs with rhymes and alliteration play a large role in this development (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Allington, 1994).

A study by Engel (1996/97) found that four-year-olds are quite attuned to the different types of rhyming patterns, formats, and metaphoric imagery of poetry.

through movement. From a baby's first attempts at pat-a-cake and peek-a-boo to the elaborate finger plays and dances of preschool, songs and poetry help children develop grace, humor, creativity, and a love of language in all its richness and complexity.

## **Authentic**

### **Multicultural Activities**

A central tenet of good teaching is that the starting point of instruction is with children and their understandings. In order to make sense of their experience, children must see the connections between what they already know and what they experience in school and other settings. Increasing the continuity and congruence between children's home experiences and the school environment is particularly critical to the success of children from diverse cultures and social classes (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Phillips, 1988). According to Rosegrant (1992), the place a teacher should start is with the child's family. In order to create a "culturally safe" classroom, she finds out as much as possible about the family backgrounds and experiences of all the children. She does this by:

- Surveying parents
- Reading multiple books on the represented cultures
- Careful observation of children to "see what experiences seem to connect with them"

Rosegrant describes a little girl from Africa who had listened to many African stories before one connected to her experience:

The story was *Bringing in the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, and in it a shepherd

is depicted standing on one leg—"like a stork." The child brightened immediately and yelled out, "That's how people stand in my country!" Her enthusiasm communicated to me that she feels culturally safe in our classroom (p. 146).

**Language and culture.** Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective has helped us understand that language and literacy are deeply embedded in the culture of the family and community. Cummins' (1986) work on the school experiences of minority children has drawn attention to the differences between Anglo and minority cultures in values and interaction, and linguistic and cognitive styles. These differences can lead to cultural conflicts that in turn can lead to school failure. Based on a number of studies (Campos & Keatinge, 1984, Cummins, 1983, Rosier & Holm, 1980, cited in Cummins, 1986), Cummins maintains that "widespread school failure does not occur in minority groups that are positively oriented towards both their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and that are not alienated from their own cultural values" (p. 22). When teachers encourage children to construct a "knowledgeable, confident self-identity" by validating children's

culture and home language (Derman-Sparks, 1989), they are simultaneously preparing children to live successfully in two worlds—their home culture and the larger society.

**ACKNOWLEDGING AND NURTURING THE CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE** of culturally and linguistically diverse children can help bridge the gap between home and school.

Acknowledging and nurturing the cultural knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse children can help bridge the gap between home and school (see Handout 14). Even when teachers cannot speak the language of all children in the classroom, they can communicate to children and parents that their language and culture are valued within the context of the school (Cummins, 1986). For example, learning as many words as possible in a linguistically diverse child's language helps validate the importance of the home language. Encouraging children to bring pictures of their families and share favorite stories or songs from home, and asking family members to share aspects of their culture, can help children feel secure and valued for who they are (Boutte & McCormick, 1992). Parents and other family and community members may be encouraged to visit the school to read, tell stories, and share oral traditions, beliefs and values, and knowledge of traditional celebrations, art, music, poetry, and dance (Wolfe, 1992).

In order to legitimize the contributions of all people (Willis, 1995), early childhood classrooms should include pictures, puppets, dolls, foods, and other objects for dramatic play that represent diverse cultures and people who are differently-abled. Literature is one of the best ways to learn about diverse cultures and ethnic groups:

■ Songs and literature from a variety of cultures, lifestyles, and income groups—especially those represented in the classroom—should be an integral part of the classroom environment. Children need to see “people like themselves” in the stories they read.

■ Creating a take-home library of children's books in diverse languages encourages parents to reinforce the heritage language as well as to read to their children (Rosegrant, 1992).

■ Books that are written in diverse languages and from diverse cultural perspectives—rather than mere translations of English stories—are particularly salient for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.



Learning a new language can be overwhelming to a young child in a new setting. Teachers can help children connect new words with meaning by using contextual cues, such as gestures, actions, pictures, and real objects. But it is not only learning new words that may be difficult. Cultural incongruities between the patterns of communication experienced by children in the home and at school can undermine successful learning. For example, many classrooms emphasize individual responsibility and achievement, com-

petition, and teacher controlled learning. Other cultural groups—such as Native Americans and Native Alaskans—may be unaccustomed to this style of learning, and place a higher value on group work that fosters shared responsibility. A curriculum that provides ample time for children to collaborate with each other in learning centers can help all children feel comfortable in the preschool setting (Phillips, 1988).

### **Literacy-Enriched Learning Centers and Pretend Play**

Before children can become readers, they must become aware that print makes sense—that is, that printed words are placed together in meaningful ways (Schickedanz, 1986). They must learn *why* people read and what people *do* when they read (Kontos, 1986). Children naturally want to imitate the behavior of significant adults; when adults at home and in other settings spend time reading and writing, these activities become desirable and meaningful. Researchers in literacy development agree that an optimal environment for children from birth to five to learn about written language is one where they can (Kontos, 1986, p. 58):

- See and hear adults read, write, and converse in their daily lives
- Read, write, speak, and listen in spontaneous situations meaningful to the child, with adults and older children
- Engage in print-related activities during play, such as pretend reading and writing

In preschools and child-care settings that support early literacy, teachers set up learning centers that encourage the active exploration of many types of mate-

rials—clay, Play Doh, blocks, mud, sand, water, puzzles, science, and manipulatives. These centers provide opportunities for children to develop oral language and to learn through concrete experiences with materials and other children. Teachers frequently read aloud to children, individually and in groups. A literacy-rich classroom often includes a listening center where children can hear tape-recorded stories and a cozy book corner with large cushions, a variety of books, puppets, and a flannel board. In this inviting corner, children read individually and with peers, enhancing both literacy development and the enjoyment of reading. In addition, there is a writing center, well stocked with a variety of writing tools and surfaces—portable chalk boards, easels, dry-erase boards, alphabet blocks, letter tiles, an assortment of alphabet puzzles, and an alphabet pocket chart.

Recently, with increased understanding of the importance of social interaction and meaningful literacy experiences for optimal literacy development, many teachers are looking for new ways to create a “print-rich” environment, one that encourages “print awareness.” Labels, signs, charts, calendars, and lists (written in the languages that make up the classroom) not only help to organize the environment but also encourage children to use print in functional and useful ways.

Literacy-enriched activity centers encourage children to further explore the relationship between reading and writing (see Handout 6). With the addition of telephone and address books, materials for writing letters and lists, and books to read to dolls, a housekeeping corner can provide numerous opportunities for chil-

dren to explore print. A nearby grocery play center, complete with newspaper ads, cash register receipts, coupons, a typewriter and typing paper, inventory sheets, pads of paper, cereal boxes and other labeled food materials, and toy paper money, further supports a child's emergent literacy.



In the block corner, children can make signs and labels for their structures, and use books such as Forrest Wilson's *What it Feels Like to be a Building* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Block City*. Similarly, teachers can use their creativity to enhance literacy in all centers. Engaging children in discussions about items to include in a particular center builds awareness and excitement. Morrow and Rand (cited in Rybczynski & Troy, 1995) found that with adult guidance and support, children in literacy-enriched play centers participat-

ed in more literacy behaviors during free play time than did children in thematic centers without adult guidance. Stone and Christie (1996) found that children in their study spent about 40 percent of their time in the learning centers engaging in literacy activities.

**Developmental spelling.** The goal of preschool is not to teach children to read and write. However, by providing multiple opportunities for children to engage in reading and writing, children explore both the purposes and forms of written language. "The writing that occurs in the play center cannot be wrong," advise researchers (Rybczynski & Troy, 1995). Insisting that children's early attempts at writing be "letter perfect" may discourage children from playing with the printed word. When writing becomes relegated to structured classroom lessons, it becomes disconnected from meaningful activity. In addition, the child's image of herself as a writer may be damaged even before she enters school. Just as caregivers help children develop into confident language users by encouraging their first attempts at talking, caregivers can help children to view themselves as readers and writers by encouraging their first attempts at these activities.

Learning to spell, like learning oral language, is a developmental process. It begins the first time a child picks up a writing instrument and makes a mark on a page (Griffith & Leavell, 1995). Marie Clay (1975) describes three stages of scribbling:

- Random scribbling for pleasure that may have certain characteristics of print,



for example, rectangular rather than circular or horizontal rather than vertical

■ Scribbling with the understanding that symbols can convey meaning

■ Creating mock messages, in which mock letters and beginning letter forms appear

From these forms, children progress to writing the alphabet letters and eventually to invented spelling. However, even when children are capable of writing a number of letters, they may use all of these strategies to create messages. In the developmental view of writing, invented spelling is not a sign of incompetence. Rather, it is viewed as an important stage of writing, as Schickedanz (1986) explains:

After much exploration, and after much exposure to print, children discover that letters represent phonemes,

and not some larger unit of speech, such as a syllable or a word. This is a very important discovery ....

Many pre-school teachers know that the words children first create when they try to

represent words in terms of their sounds do not resemble conventional spellings. Children may write *kt* for cat, *grl* for girl, and *mdpi* for mudpie. What may not be readily apparent is how systematic these

invented spellings are and how much they reveal children's keen ability to detect similarities and differences between the ways various sounds are produced (p. 88).

At first, children are likely to write only the first sound of words. Next, they commonly write the first and last sounds (especially when these are consonants). Vowels typically come later. Developmental spelling is a powerful tool for developing phonemic awareness and offers teachers an observation window into children's emerging understanding of symbol/sound correspondence. These first attempts at writing serve another important function; McLane and McNamee (1991) point out that "when children play at reading and writing, they are actively trying to use—



and to understand and make sense of—reading and writing long before they can actually read and write" (p. 3). Rybczynski and Troy (1995) observe: "As children play at being grown-ups, who use reading and writing for real reasons in a particu-

lar environment, they uncover some of the mysteries of printed language" (p. 7).

**The role of pretend play.** Play also leads children into literacy in another important way. Pretend play, in particular, in which children make up increasingly complex stories and act them out, leads

## DEVELOPMENTAL SPELLING IS A POWERFUL TOOL

for developing phonemic awareness and offers teachers an observation window into children's emerging understanding of symbol/sound correspondence.

children into storytelling, writing, and reading. McLane and McNamee (1991) explain: When children create imaginary situations in pretend play,

they invent and inhabit "alternative" or "possible" worlds. This is similar to what they do when they listen to storybooks, and to what they do when they read or write stories themselves. Indeed, there are similarities between pretend play and storytelling, and in the kinds of competence the two require. Many children make up their first stories in the context of pretend play, creating and enacting their own dramatic narratives (and reenacting stories they have heard being read aloud). Indeed, one of the things that attracts young children to pretend play is the chance to tell stories. Later, many children are attracted to writing and reading for the same reasons: They find they can participate in stories told by others (p. 3).

Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist whose sociocultural framework has greatly influenced early childhood education, regarded

pretend play as a leading factor in development, the preeminent educational activity of early childhood. He believed that it was initially through play that a child acts on and masters her environment, moving from concrete to abstract thought. According to Vygotsky, a distinguishing characteristic of representational play is that *in play, a child creates an imaginary situation*. For example, when a child substitutes a stick for a horse or a banana for a telephone, the stick and banana become a "pivot" between the real and the imagined. For the young child, it is the possibility of executing a representational gesture with the object (i.e., "riding" the stick or "talking" into the banana) that assigns the function to the object and gives it meaning (Vygotsky, 1978).

This early demonstration of abstract thinking—understanding that one thing can stand for another—is essential for children's understanding that using lines and curves can represent objects (drawing) and, later, their understanding that print represents words that have meaning. Vygotsky regarded gestures, make-believe, drawing, and written language as comprising a continuum of development (Newman & Holzman, 1993). While at first children may tell elaborate stories to accompany their drawings, later they are able to learn to write through discovering that they can draw speech (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

An optimal literacy environment provides many opportunities for children to engage in dramatic play and storytelling (see Handout 7). Preschoolers who engage in sociodramatic play are advanced in general development, show an enhanced ability to understand the feelings of oth-

ers, and are seen as more socially competent by their teachers (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Pretend play offers an arena in which all facets of conversational dialogue can be extended—to resolve disputes, to enter into a group engaged in make believe, to ensure continued collaboration, and to exchange points of view (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Memory is also enhanced through fantasy play. Newman (1990) reported that opportunities for play with objects enhances children's ability to remember names of objects, and Silvern and her colleagues (1986) found that recall of an unfamiliar story is promoted by opportunities to act out the story.

### Storytelling

Just as children often make up their first stories in the context of pretend play, children's fantasy play is enriched by hearing and telling stories. Teachers can link children's fantasies with storytelling by encouraging children to act out stories from books and by creating stories from children's play. For example, when teachers listen carefully to children's pretend play, they can bring the fantasies back into the classroom by including them in group storytelling. In addition, they can place props and books in activity centers—a boat with plastic farm animals for *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, hats and costumes for the *Little Red Hen*. Cooper (1993) tells about a preschool teacher who placed a copy of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (which she had read aloud earlier) and a small wooden boat in the housekeeping corner. She was delighted to see one four-year-old immediately begin to act out the story upon finding the props. Rowe (1998) found that children in

her study had a strong need to link play and books, and skillfully shifted between book-talk and book-related play.

### The beginnings of a "narrative sense of self."

By the age of four, most children can tell complex stories about personal experiences, but the beginnings of storytelling begin much earlier. Stern (1977) argues that around the end of the second year, a "narrative sense of self" emerges. These narratives help to "get ordinary life under control" by anticipating the day's events, sorting out the week's routines, and recounting experiences. The musings of 28-month-old Emily illustrate this view:

Yellow buses. 1 2 3 4 days we have yellow buses, but not 5 4 5 4 5 have blue buses. I like ... these days we're going to have the yellow buses, and the ... right now, it's Thursday, and Friday, and S-, S- ... and Sunday, so it's, um ... a yellow bus ... day. And on Friday and Sunday, it's blue day, so I going on yellow and a blue. One day going on a yellow bus and one day going on a blue bus .... On blue days, we just get blue. I can see yellow and I can see ... black (p. 67).

Emily's soliloquies demonstrate that the habit of playing with words can not only help to sort one's thoughts about the world, but also lead to creative use of language that employs rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. Studies have shown that forming a narrative of a personal experience aids retention of personal memory (Nelson, 1996), and that children can more easily remember facts when they are put into narrative form. Wells





(1986) studied children in Bristol, England, and found that those who told and heard stories at home under the age of four were the most likely to learn to read easily and with interest once they got to school.

According to Engel (1996/97), "storytelling is perhaps the most powerful way that human beings organize experience" and the "single strongest predictor of literacy" (p. 3):

Storytelling is an essential, perhaps the essential activity of human beings. It serves a myriad of functions for the young child. Stories allow children to learn about their culture, but also serve as a kind of passport into the culture. Children tell stories as a way of solving emotional, cognitive, and social puzzles and to sort out problems or concerns. Perhaps most importantly, stories are one of the fundamental ways in which we each create an extended self. The developing child's cumulative repertoire of stories gives him or her a sense of self across time and situation (p. 8).

Children's stories provide valuable insight into what they think about and how they interpret their experiences. When children attempt to recount an event, attentive listening and substantive questions encourage children to build the story and help them to "build a relationship that extends beyond the immediate context" (p. 9). By participating in genuine conversations—discussing past events and shared experi-

ences—adults and children are building a shared past, a past on which to build long-lasting relationships. Engel concludes: “The richer the repertoire of storytelling styles a child is exposed to, the more possibilities for that child to develop his or her own powerful narrative voice, one that reflects both his community, his family, and his inner life” (p. 9).

Engel suggests three kinds of experiences that promote storytelling ability during the early years (1996/97, p. 8):

- Having conversations—plenty of them, and long ones—with adults
- Talking about the past and the future, even before your child can do this on her own
- Hearing and participating in stories of all kinds

A caregiver in a child-care program or a preschool teacher might well wonder how to have these rich conversations with each child, when she might be responsible for six to eight toddlers or 10 to 15 four-year-olds. Clearly, even the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) recommended adult/child ratios make such extended dialogue difficult. Having enough adults in group settings to provide conversational partners is essential for optimal language and storytelling development. In addition, teachers of young children can examine their curriculum to determine how to increase opportunities for children to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Vivian Paley, a preschool and kindergarten teacher and author of a number of books about her experience as a teacher, describes how she made the shift from a teacher-directed classroom (in which she was determined to teach the concepts

that were in her mind) to a classroom in which she sought daily to uncover and describe the *child’s point of view*. Over the years, storytelling, storyplaying, and fantasy play became the core curriculum (see Handout 8).

### **Vivian Paley’s Approach to Storytelling and Fantasy Play**

*A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose. I listen to the children’s stories three times: when they are dictated, when we act them out, and finally at home, as I transcribe them from my tape recorder. After that, I talk about them to the children whenever I can. The stories are at the center of this fantasy of mine that one day I will link together all the things we do and say in the classroom (1990, p. 3).*

**JUST AS CHILDREN OFTEN MAKE UP THEIR FIRST STORIES** in the context of pretend play, children’s fantasy play is enriched by hearing and telling stories.

In *Bad Guys Don’t Have Birthdays*, Paley (1988) describes her transition from a Great Books discussion leader to kindergarten teacher. She writes that although the Great Books discussions often “sounded as if they were real discussions ... what I wanted desperately, was to avoid awkward silences” (p. 7). When she became a kindergarten teacher she had curriculum guides instead of printed questions:

I still believed it was my job to fill the time quickly with a minimum of distractions, and the appearance of a correct answer gave me the surest feeling that I was teaching. It did not occur to me that the distractions might be the sound of the children thinking .... Then, miraculously, I discovered the tape recorder and knew I could become my own best witness. To begin with, it revealed why my discussions seldom had the ring of truth; I had not yet figured out which truths the children wanted to pursue (p. 9).

For more than 20 years, Paley recorded children's conversations, stories, and acting out stories, providing a rich documentation and analysis of children's points of view. She soon discovered that the themes which occupied free play were those that could not be discussed—fears of abandonment and rejection, new babies in the family, quarreling parents—and that fantasy play “is the first defense against every kind of fear” (1990, p. 162), providing a way to work out unspoken dilemmas in the safety of a pretend world. She also uncovered ample evidence of Vygotsky's observation that representational play contains rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully act out the play scene. Writes Paley (1990), “Fantasy play is not the least structured activity, though the structure is not provided by the teacher. The children are using the most reliable structure ever invented for thinking about anything: story” (p. 93).

Paley's books provide numerous examples of recorded conversations and sto-

ries that reveal that the “sounds of the children's thinking” are rich with philosophical debate; impeccable logic often is embedded in magical thinking; and private fantasy mingles with television cartoons and fairy tales:

I record their fantasy play because it is the main repository for secret messages, the intuitive language with which the children express their imagery and logic, their pleasure and curiosity, their ominous feelings and fears. For the price of keeping order in the room I am privileged to attend the daily performance of private drama and universal theater that is called a preschool classroom (1988, p. vii).

### **Story dictation and story dramatization.**

Although recording class discussions and children's fantasy play provided rich insight into the child's point of view, it was the *connection* between more formal storytelling and play that remained elusive for Paley. Dramatic play—both children's pretend play and acting out fairy tales, storybooks, poems, and songs—were popular activities. Children were also encouraged to dictate their own stories. However, few children (and these were mostly girls) chose to tell a story “if they could do something else instead” (1981, p. 11). Obviously, writes Paley (1981), “the words did not sufficiently represent the action, which needed to be shared” (p. 12). *Only when they began acting out each story the day it was written* (with the author as director), did story writing become a popular activity. “For this alone, the children would give

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up play time, as it was a true extension of play" (p. 12). According to Paley (1990):

Stories that are not acted out are fleeting dreams; private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. If in the press of a busy day, I am tempted to shorten the process by only reading the stories aloud and skipping the dramatizations, the children object. They say, "But we haven't *done* the story yet" (p. 25).

By the time Paley wrote *Wally's Stories* (1981), "acting had become the major integrating factor of the day, encircling and extending every other interest" (p. 66). On the 12-foot painted circle that was the stage, children dramatized three kinds of stories: picture-book stories, the children's own material, and fairy tales. Now the children's play and story writing were connected and enriched through stories of all kinds. Stories written by adults helped children learn new words and think in more complex and abstract ways. Fairy tales, in particular, "with their superior plot and carefully structured dialogue, set the tone and established the themes that enabled us to pursue new ideas and look more deeply at old ones" (p. 67). Writes Paley (1981), "Fairy tales stimulate the child's imagination in a way that enlarges the vocabulary, extends narrative skills, and encourages new ideas" (p. 128).

**The power of magic.** "The key to the fairy tale is magic. Just thinking about magic was satisfying to the children," explains Paley. While many adults are disturbed by the magical thinking of children and believe that by confronting chil-

dren with the errors of their "immature" thinking they can force children to move to an adult point of view, Paley views magic as the "common footpath from which new trails are explored. I have learned not to resist this magic, but to seek it out as a legitimate part

of 'real' school" (1981, p. 4). In doing so, she discovered that "magic can erase the experiential differences among children."

In *Wally's Stores*

(1981), Paley describes a Japanese girl who was not comfortable with the other children and was afraid to speak English. But through memorizing lines from fairy tales, which she "carried around like gifts, bestowing them on children in generous doses," Akemi began to conquer English:

"I am the wishing bird," she said, flying gracefully into the doll corner. "I wish for a golden crown," Jill responded, whereupon Akemi delicately touched her head with an invisible wand.

Adults who go about quoting poetry seldom receive encouragement, but the children rewarded Akemi by repeating her phrases and motions. She correctly interpreted this as friendship. Whenever a child copied her, Akemi would say, "Okay. You friend of me" (p. 124).

Through the magic of fairy tales, Akemi progressed from memorizing phrases, to telling imaginative and complex stories,

**"FANTASY PLAY IS NOT THE LEAST STRUCTURED ACTIVITY, though the structure is not provided by the teacher. The children are using the most reliable structure ever invented for thinking about anything: story" (Paley, 1990, p. 93).**

to story acting in a remarkably short time. Similarly, in *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom* (1990), Paley tells the story of Jason, "the quintessential outsider," who, in the beginning of the school year, "speaks only of helicopters and broken blades, apparently indifferent to the play and stories that surround him" (p. 11). Gradually Jason learned to listen to and observe the other children, and through the context of play, entered the classroom community. A tape-recorded conversation between Jason and his classmates also provides evidence of Holbrook's (1981) contention that many children enter school with poetic images and unique word usage:

"Pshush! Turn to one sword! Two swords can turn to one sword. One sword can turn into a hundred swords."

"Save me, Superman! Turn my sword into a hundred swords."

"Okay. There! The hundred rainbows. Now I turned them into a hundred arrows until God."

Their unrehearsed poetry is astonishing. Only in play can they climb so high and so far, and Jason is as much a poet as anyone. He comes in from the playground to use the toilet and stops in the doorway.

"Hi Jason," Samantha says. "You can be the rainbow baby. Joseph is the dad."

"I can't. I have to go back outside."

"Why do you?"

"Because I'm running back and forth as fast as the sky and faster than the clouds" (Paley, 1990, p. 94).

Clearly, children, as well as adults, provide children with language models, conversational partners, and help children connect what they know to new knowledge and understanding. Paley (1990) con-





cludes, "Friendship and fantasy form the natural path that leads children into a new world of other voices, other views, and other ways of expressing ideas and feelings they recognize as similar to their own" (p. 34). When children and teachers create a classroom culture with shared vocabulary, meaning, and experiences, Paley's books demonstrate that it is friendship, fantasy, and literacy that flourish.

Pretend play, storytelling, and story acting are enriched by stories of all kinds. Extensive storyreading in the early years builds vocabulary and concept knowledge; enhances memory and listening skills; helps children think in more complex, abstract, and creative ways; broadens children's range of experience; helps children learn the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories or narrative text; and helps children develop phonological awareness through rhythm and rhyme. Sharing stories with very young children helps build both physical and emotional closeness, and lays the foundation for a lifelong love of reading (Barclay, Benelli, & Curtis, 1995; Gottschall, 1995) (see Handout 9).

### **Sharing Books with Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers**

*Maggie, a young toddler, has been clutching a book as she wanders around the classroom, being careful not to put it down. She glances across the room and notices another toddler leaving the lap of a caregiver. She seizes the opportunity and quickly plops down in the recently vacated caregiver's lap. Maggie then takes caregiver's hands and guides them around her waist to form a*

*secure embrace while opening the book. She looks back at the caregiver as if to say, "I'm ready for you to begin reading." Since Maggie has control of the book, the "reading" begins from the back of the book, with the pages turned at Maggie's discretion.*

*The caregiver begins describing the illustrations and comments on the things found on each of the pages, taking cues from Maggie's deliberate pointing and questioning. Maggie is intensely focused throughout the interactive process as she turns the pages back and forth. With each passage through the same book, Maggie develops an ever-increasing command of her language. She communicates her understanding of these concepts by pointing and naming objects and symbols throughout the book. Maggie is later seen testing a newly acquired concept as she declares a rectangle to be a "trunk" like the one the pirates had in the book she read (Kupetz & Green, 1997, p. 24).*

This description of a successful reading experience illustrates a number of guidelines for reading with young children. First, and most important, the episode could quite easily have taken place in a home setting, rather than a childcare setting. Schools and childcare programs that nurture children's emergent literacy strive to create an environment similar to the homes of children who read early and who enjoy reading (Kupetz & Green, 1997; Barclay, Benelli, & Curtis, 1995). In these homes,

books are everywhere and frequently shared (Gottschall, 1995).

As she might at home, Maggie enjoys her self-chosen story from the comfort and security of her caregiver's lap and "reads" the story in a way that is meaningful to her. Her responsive caregiver follows her lead, inviting Maggie's participation and helping her learn new language, concepts, and an appreciation of books and reading. Although we often think of "real school"

**RESEARCHERS AGREE** that  
it is never too early to read  
books with children.

as a place where  
formal, direct  
instruction takes  
place at set times

during the day, it is the animated, informal, interactive experiences with reading, such as the one previously described, that set the stage for young children to be successful readers.

While older preschoolers often enjoy listening to stories in small groups, preschoolers still need closeness and cuddling. As Strickland and Morrow (1989) observe, "It is the intimate sharing of a book between a child and a caring adult that helps the child grow to love and bond with books." Researchers agree that it is never too early to read books with children—even newborns like to look at contrasting colors. As the infant enjoys looking at the bright, colorful pictures that are found in many children's books, his eyes are learning to focus. Talking with an infant about what she sees introduces her to her first shared book experience. Kupetz and Green (1997) note, "It is the sound of the reader's voice that gets the young child's attention even before he can focus on the pictures. The warmth and security of being held and the melodic, soothing sound of the

reader's voice make for a very pleasurable combination" (p. 24).

Kupetz and Green (1997) describe a number of books that can be enjoyed by infants and toddlers. By four to six months, infants can focus on pictures and eye-hand coordination is improving. The stiff, laminated cardboard pages of a board book can stand up to teething, as well as grabbing, tearing, and throwing—developing skills of the young infant. "Point and say" books can also be introduced at this time and continue to be popular with toddlers. Children learn language and new vocabulary words as adults point to the simple, uncluttered illustrations and name them. By the end of the first year, many toddlers can also point to the pictures, an important step on the road to language. "Touch and smell" books encourage babies to use all their senses to feel Daddy's rough beard, smell the flowers, and lift up the tab to find Spot the dog.

Babies and toddlers love the rhythmic language of nursery rhymes and other poetry and the repetitive language of short, predictable books. Older toddlers love chiming in on a repetitive phrase and may even memorize whole books. Gross and Jankowicz (1993) ask, "Why would a child want to hear a book he has practically memorized? Maybe it makes him feel 'smart' to know all the words. Maybe he likes keeping things 'the same.' Or maybe he has connected with the book in a special way. That book has become a friend to him!"

Nursery rhymes, Dr. Seuss books, and other poetry may remain popular for years—the preschooler may find that she can recognize some of the words she has memorized, a first step in matching print

to sound. In fact, children who read “naturally” often “teach themselves to read” by reading the same books over and over (Sulzby, 1985) (see pages 55-56 in this document).

Children build phonemic awareness when they discuss the same rhymes and alliteration that have delighted them since they were toddlers. Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, and Crossland (1989) found that nursery rhyme knowledge at three years was related to reading ability at six years even after differences in social background and IQ were taken into account.

Big Books, with enlarged text and pictures, are used extensively with older preschoolers and may even be used for occasional small-group reading with toddlers. But early educators warn that reading to toddlers is “certainly *not* a large-group activity. It can occur effectively only in very small groups or in a one-to-one pairing” (Kupetz & Green, 1997). If books are to become friends, toddlers, like Maggie in the previous vignette, must be allowed to carry books from place to place, sharing and reading them frequently (Gottschall, 1995). And if toddlers are careless with books, what should caregivers do? Gottschall suggests that teachers help young children take good care of books by appealing to the toddler’s natural inclination to attribute human characteristics to all things:

If a child loses a book, a teacher might “hear it crying” and organize a search party to look for that sad, lonely book. If a child tears a book, it needs to go to the doctor; a handy first aid kit for books can be equipped with transparent mending tape, scissors, library cards, and glue ....

Personifying books carries the message that books, like people, need care. Doing so playfully and on a pretend level carries none of the anxieties or bad feelings generated by disapproval or a reprimand. Children learn to care for books in a way that makes sense to them and leaves them feeling good and responsible (p. 32).

**“Flumping” into pictures.** Preschoolers who have had many such leisurely, enjoyable experiences with simple picture books are usually ready to hear more complex stories that require a longer attention span and attentive listening. Although some children prefer to listen to a story straight through with no interruptions, many children enjoy discussing the book as they listen. Open-ended questions, such as “What do you think will happen next?” and “How do you think Max felt when his mother sent him to bed without supper?” encourage children to think critically about the story—imagining, empathizing, and questioning.

Drawing children’s attention to the words as they read helps them become familiar with print. But adults should also provide ample time for children to look at pictures, which provide clues to the narrative and create an imaginary world for children. One four-year-old never allowed his mother to turn the page until he had had time to “flump” into the picture (enter into the imaginary world created by the illustrator). Because of the importance of illustrations in scaffolding children’s early

**PICTURES NOT ONLY PROVIDE CLUES** to the narrative, they also create an imaginary world for children to enter.



attempts at reading, developing storytelling abilities based on illustrations and repetition is often a goal of early childhood programs (MacGillivray, 1997).

A natural connection between art and writing can be strengthened by encouraging children to illustrate stories (their own and others') and create stories about their drawings and paintings. Children who are naturally artistic may prefer to paint a

continuous record of a child's progress over time. Portfolios can include photographs, self-portraits, writings, drawings, dictated stories, and teacher observations of children engaged in various activities. In addition, tape recordings of children's storybook reading document the progress that young children make in making sense from stories. At first, children's attempts to read are based on pictures. As chil-

dren's understanding of written language grows through repeated readings of many types of stories and poetry, storytelling becomes increasingly like written language (See pages 55-56 of this document).

Ideally, children's portfolios should be shared

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picture first and create a story to go with their picture. Studying authors and introducing techniques, such as the torn-paper technique used by Eric Carle in his illustrations, encourage children to think of themselves as authors and illustrators (Madura, 1995).

### **Keeping Track of Literacy Development**

Authentic assessments—those that reflect the child's performance during typical activities in the classroom—are the primary assessment strategy in a developmentally appropriate classroom. When portfolios consist of an organized collection of children's work, they provide a

with their kindergarten teachers, providing a picture of children's literacy development during the preschool years. Keeping a portfolio of children's work helps parents, teachers, and children appreciate development over time. The child who may be discouraged that "she will never write as well as Mark" (her older brother) can see the progress she has made since she was a "baby who only scribbled." Portfolios can be powerful educational tools for encouraging children to take charge of their own learning, and they play a critical role in helping to develop shared meaning and memories among teachers, parents, and children (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). A child-care program director

writes, "We chose to keep a spiral journal for each child [for recording their stories]. The other day Amanda wrote a story and afterwards spent an hour drawing pictures that had every single character! The frog, the mom, the dad, the castle—it was breathtaking! We photocopied the story, then attached it to the picture to take home, yet could keep the original in her journal."



It is important that teachers of preschool children, in their zeal to enhance children's understanding and appreciation of the printed word, do not emphasize reading and writing to the exclusion of other valuable activities. Children need many different types of experiences to develop imagination, creativity, empathy, and conflict and problem-solving skills. But what about children who come from "disadvantaged" homes characterized by poverty and the many risk factors associated with poverty? Aren't all these enriched experiences a luxury for children who frequently enter school "behind" their middle-class peers? Don't they need more

direct instruction in reading-readiness skills, such as decoding, practicing the alphabet, and copying sentences? Isn't it the job of the preschool teacher to see to it that these children enter kindergarten ready to learn?

## Children at Risk for School Failure

As discussed earlier, there is much evidence that children who come from families who place a high value on literacy and who have a rich oral-language vocabulary and extensive experience with storybook reading tend to be early and competent readers. Schickedanz (1986, pp. 38-39) notes that by the time such children enter school, they have already learned the following:

- 1. How books work:** Books printed in English are read from front to back, left to right, and top to bottom.
- 2. Print should make sense:** The discovery that words are placed together in meaningful ways is fundamental to learning to read.
- 3. Print and speech are related in a specific way:** Storybooks provide many different samples of print for children to practice matching speech to print.
- 4. Book language differs from speech:** "Written language, unlike oral language, must carry the total load of meaning without ambiguity. It is more formal, more complete, and more textured than spoken language...." (Holdaway, 1979, p. 54).
- 5. Books are enjoyable:** Positive feelings toward reading help children read often and for pleasure, persevering even when frustrated by a difficult text.

## 6. Patterns of interacting characteristic of behaviors expected in a

**school setting:** Children gain confidence and competence when they can relate their knowledge to the school setting.

It is easy to see why children who enter school with these competencies are at a distinct advantage compared with children

who have little experience with books. In *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning in Print* (1990), Marilyn Adams estimates that the typical middle-class child enters first grade with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture-book reading, while the corre-

sponding child from a low-income family averages 25 such hours. "Is there any chance," she asks, "that the first-grade teacher can make up for that difference in 360 hours of one-on-twenty instruction?"

### **Poverty and Early Language Learning**

"Across the United States, we are beginning to hear the rumblings of a quiet crisis. Our nation's children under the age of three and their families are in trouble, and their plight worsens every day," begins a report by the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children (1994). The U.S. child-poverty rate rose from 22.3 percent in 1992 to 22.7 percent in 1993, leaving 15.7 million children in

poverty, the highest number in 30 years. Young children fared even worse. Between 1989 and 1992, the number of poor children under six grew from five to six million, and the poverty rate for these children reached 26 percent (Children's Defense Fund, 1995). More than a third—2.8 million—of the nation's three- and four-year-old children were from low-income families in 1990, a growth of 17 percent since 1980 (U.S. General Accounting Office, April 1994).

While being poor does not inevitably lead to problems in school, poverty's adverse effects on children and families have been well documented. Poverty gives rise to many types of deprivation and increases the likelihood that numerous risk factors are present simultaneously: in parents, child, health care, housing, support systems, schools, child care, and neighborhoods. Due to the interaction of multiple risk factors, children from poor families are disproportionately at risk for school failure. Nationally, poor children are three times more likely to dropout of school and poor teen girls are five-and-a-half times more likely to become teen mothers (Children First for Oregon, 1994). According to Lawrence Aber, Director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, "The increasing number of poor young children reflects a 20-year trend that is having devastating consequences on children today whether they are toddlers or teenagers."

It is important to note that most low-income parents provide nurturing environments for their children's development, despite the difficulties presented by living in poverty. In addition, although white middle-class Americans place a high value

**IN BEGINNING TO READ: THINKING AND LEARNING IN PRINT (1990), MARILYN ADAMS ESTIMATES** that the typical middle-class child enters first grade with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture-book reading, while the corresponding child from a low-income family averages 25 such hours. "Is there any chance," she asks, "that the first-grade teacher can make up for that difference in 360 hours of one-on-twenty instruction?"

on the decontextualized, abstract written word, other ethnic groups and social classes may encourage the development of other intelligences, including aesthetic, musical, and kinesthetic literacy. A study conducted in an elementary school in Charlotte, North Carolina (Stone, 1992), found that 64 percent of children were either tactile or kinesthetic learners, compared to only 21 percent who were primarily auditory learners, and 20 percent who were visual learners.

In addition, many children from diverse cultural backgrounds, who may also be poor, have a great deal of knowledge and language competence that goes unrecognized by teachers who are predominantly white and middle class. Thus, differences in verbal interaction and narrative styles may be interpreted as deficits (Delpit, 1995). Delpit points out that teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status,

failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. "It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination" (p. 172).

Teachers, then, can do much to ameliorate the difficulties often experienced by children from low-income families by having high expectations for all children and by examining their own biases and beliefs regarding children living in poverty. If schools are to meet the needs of all children, they must build on the strengths, experience, and competencies that children bring to school, encouraging and providing opportunities for children to use their multiple intelligences.

**The crucial role of reading for school success.** There is no question that reading at a proficient level is essential for children to be successful in school and



beyond. Learning to read is, in fact, the top priority in elementary education (Boyer, 1995). Recent research has demonstrated a strong correlation between proficiency in oral language and success in reading and writing; problems with language are believed by some to be at the heart of the difficulties many low-income children encounter in school. Research on brain development has helped to clarify the vital role that caregiver-child interactions play in both oral and written language development. This research has provided striking physiological evidence that validates what many educators and parents have long suspected: The day-to-day interactions between young children and their social and physical environment directly affect the architecture of the brain.

**Learning to talk.** As discussed earlier, the optimal environment for stimulating language development is one of responsiveness to and acceptance of the child's communicative attempts. By responding to infant's babbles, coos, and smiles as if they are meaningful and including children in conversations long before they say their first words, parents help children to become confident and competent language learners.

In contrast, a parenting style that relies on directives, direct teaching, and teaching by imitation has been associated with lower language functioning (Snow, Dubber, & Blauw, 1982). In a longitudinal study, Tough (1982) found that it is precisely this parenting style that is prevalent among low-income families. The majority of the talk of middle-class mothers falls into the *reflexive* or *associative* category. For example, a middle-class mother might say, "Please get off the

counter because I'm afraid you might fall." In contrast, the talk of disadvantaged mothers falls more frequently into the *categorical* category of speech, for example, "I'm telling you to get down now. Do it because I said so."

Parents who respond to their children's interests in various aspects of the world, helping them to observe, compare, reflect, predict, empathize, and reason are offering their children experience in the ways in which parents think (Tough, 1982). But parents may actively discourage thinking and hinder the development of curiosity and interest in the world. Hart and Risley (1992) found that low socioeconomic (SES) children frequently experience a language-impooverished environment, receiving substantially less parenting per hour than children in middle-class families, and that these differences were strongly correlated with subsequent IQ measures of the children. In addition, a substantial proportion of parent utterances to children functioned to prohibit children's activities. These investigators found a significant inverse relationship between the rate of prohibitions and children's IQ. They concluded that the strong relationship between even low prohibitions and unfavorable child outcomes suggests that prohibitions have a toxic effect on children's speech development.

In *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Hart and Risley (1995) discuss the findings of their longitudinal study on language development in three different types of families: welfare, working class, and professional. All of the families in their study adequately met their children's needs for health, safety, and affection and were

considered "well functioning." Yet considerable differences in the amount and quality of parent-child interactions were recorded. In professional families, more than 80 percent of the feedback to 13- to 18-month-old children was affirmative. However, in families with parents on welfare, more than 80 percent of the feedback to children of this age was negative. The researchers note:

A consistent and pervasive negative feedback tone was the model for the children of how families work together. Given the strong relationships shown in the longitudinal data between the prevalence of prohibitions in the first years of life and lowered child accomplishments, lasting still at age nine, the prospects for the next generation of welfare children seem bleak (p. 178).

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It is not only the *quality* of the language-learning environment that is different for many poor children. The *amount* of verbal interaction between parents and their children varies greatly by social class. Farran and Ramey (1980) found that middle-class mothers increased their involvement with their infants from six to 20 months, whereas many low-income mothers decreased their involvement. In a longitudinal study conducted by Farren and Haskins (cited in Farren & Ramey, 1980), middle-class mothers played with their three-year-olds twice as much as low-income mothers.

Hart (1982) found that although the language of poor children displayed as great a variety and complexity as middle-class children, they used complex structures less frequently. In addition, poor children added new words and structures

more slowly than advantaged children.

The result was "a cumulative, ever-widening gap between the size of the lexicon in use by children in poverty vs. advantaged children" (p. 209).

In their longitudinal study, Hart and Risley (1995) extrapolated from their data on the number of words per hour heard by children in the three types of families they studied. They concluded that by age three, the children in professional families would have heard more than 30 million words, the children in working-class families 20 million, and the children in welfare families 10 million. These differences are correlated with differences in vocabulary growth rate, vocabulary use, and IQ test scores. Multiple-regression analysis showed that race made no contribution to child accomplishments over and above parenting style.

These studies show that well before the age of three, children's language development is on a path that greatly influences further learning. As Hart and Risley (1995) note, "The amount and diversity of children's past experience influence which new opportunities for experience they notice and choose" (p. 194). The authors conclude that "helping parents is an alternative worth trying .... The nation could commit to a goal of ensuring that all children get enriched experience and models of good parenting whether at home or in childcare facilities" (p. 212).

## Using Research to Inform Practice

*The debate regarding early literacy experiences should not be conceptualized*



*as 'either literacy or no literacy.' The critical issue is, What types of literacy experiences are appropriate for young children? (Hiebert, 1998).*

Family literacy programs have been successful in bridging the gap between home and school by providing enjoyable intergenerational educational experiences. Based on the premise that the family's literacy environment is the best predictor of a child's academic success, the goal of family literacy programs is to provide opportunities for children and parents to learn together. Programs may include book giveaways, lending libraries for parents, workshops on storybook reading, early childhood programs, adult basic and parenting education, and coordination with other service providers.

In family literacy programs, parents are encouraged to see themselves as important teachers, even if they have lim-

ited reading skills. For example, parents are encouraged to engage in a variety of enjoyable activities with their children, providing questions and comments that promote language development, and to view storytelling as an important literacy activity that lays the foundation for learning to read. Linguistically diverse parents are encouraged to tell stories, to read to children in their primary language, and to share knowledge of their culture. Such activities help children to connect their lives outside the school with literacy activities.

Patricia Edwards, a professor and senior researcher at the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning at Michigan State University, notes that the effects of good family literacy programs can extend to many aspects of a parent's life:

What researchers need to see is that the empowerment parents experience goes beyond learning



more about reading aloud to their children. Parents in this book reading program (Parents as Partners in Reading) for instance, made personal decisions to seek more education, used literacy to express their opinions publicly in newspaper editorials, and were offered employment based on their new confidence and skills (1995, p. 563).

### **Child care and emergent literacy.**

High-quality child care can provide an enriched environment that enhances children's language development and positive self-image as learners. However, children from low-income homes are more likely than children from middle-class homes to spend large amounts of time in inadequate child-care settings. According to Polly Greenberg (1991), a longtime early childhood educator and advocate and Director of NAEYC's Publications Program, "The United States practices the law of 'maximum feasible risk build-up'; the children most at risk are often also made victims of the lowest quality day care, thus increasing their risk of growing up in poor shape" (p. 38).

A responsive environment, in which children's communicative attempts are encouraged and responded to in a way that fosters further dialogue, can do much to facilitate language development. Phillips (1987) reported that the amount and quality of verbal interaction engaged in by caregivers and children in child care emerged as the strongest predictor of positive child outcomes. Similar conclusions were reached by the researchers of the Abecedarian Project. Launched in 1972 at the Frank Porter Graham Child Devel-

opment Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, this project is considered one of the most intensive studies of the effects of early childhood education on low-income children. The children who received preschool services (compared with a control group, matched for income and education) showed consistent IQ gains from age three and held a four-point IQ edge at age 15. They also outscored the control group in mathematics and reading and were less likely to be placed in special-education classes or retained in grade. Like Phillips (1987), principal investigator Frances Campbell concluded that the quality of adult-child interaction is the critical factor in child outcomes.

According to Marion Blank (1982), "there is no substitute for a dialogue with an adult who provides a good language model and who presses a child to stretch his or her cognitive functioning." Data suggest that 20 minutes three times a week of one-to-one interaction can lead to dramatic gains in children's language competence.

Yet in many preschools and schools, due in large part to high child-teacher ratios, teachers frequently do not respond to children's questions and comments, or respond in ways that end the interaction. In addition, in some early intervention classrooms, teachers have been taught to concentrate on the form of language, rather than the substance—on whether a child uses correct grammar, rather than how the child uses language to communicate or to reason. Halliday, McIntosh, and Stevens (1964) have labeled this traditional focus on form as being akin to teaching a starving man how to use a knife and fork (cited in McGuinness, 1982).

Tough (1982) points out that even preschools and schools for middle-class children frequently operate in a way that does not encourage children to become involved in their own learning. When teachers rely primarily on teacher-direct-

**PHILLIPS (1987) REPORTED THAT THE AMOUNT AND QUALITY of verbal interaction engaged in by caregivers and children in child care emerged as the strongest predictor of positive child outcomes.**

ed activities, children are often put in the position of passive responders. While schools frequently "teach language," both

dren are frequently organized around discrete skills taught in a linear sequence. Although children who learn skills in isolation may successfully memorize the alphabet and improve their handwriting abilities, these activities often do little to engender an appreciation of reading, build vocabulary and concept formation, or help children express themselves through language. In fact, by being required to participate in activities that have little meaning or intrinsic value, children may lose their initial enthusiasm for reading and writing.

Tough (1982) and Hart (1982) propose that "it is not that children from disadvantaged environments lack language, but that their expectations about using language do not support learning" (p. 13). While all children (in the absence of severe disability) develop a functional use of language, not all young children have opportunities to use language to reflect, analyze, and create imaginary worlds.

In our efforts to "get children ready for next year," preschools, like public schools, frequently emphasize vertical learning—learning of skills and facts—at the expense of horizontal learning—the deepening of understanding (Kostelnik, 1992). Because many teachers believe that children must be taught reading-readiness skills before they engage in reading and writing activities, preschool teachers may require young children to spend long periods of time practicing the alphabet, matching circles and triangles, and copying letters and sentences.

Children from low-SES families, in particular, may be viewed as deficient in language and other basic skills. To remedy these deficiencies, curricula for poor chil-

Several studies have found that young children in skills-based classrooms that emphasize letter recognition and letter-sound correspondence develop patterns of passivity and lose literate behaviors, such as choosing and persisting in reading and writing activities on their own (Freppon, 1995; Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990). In contrast, a number of studies have found that young children in literature-based classrooms have a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers (Freppon, 1995; Morrow, 1992; Stice & Bertrand, 1990).

Nor do basic skills suffer in classrooms that emphasize literature experiences that include reading for pleasure, storytelling, repeated readings of favorite stories, and interactive storyreading. Children appear to develop phonics knowledge, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well or better than children in more traditional classrooms (McIntyre & Freppon, 1994; Stice & Bertrand, 1990). In a number of studies, children also achieved higher scores on tests of reading comprehension and developed more strate-

gies for dealing with problems in reading (see pages 58-60 in this document).

**Brain research.** Research on brain development has enhanced our understanding of how the brain processes information. Because the brain is designed to perceive and generate patterns, the brain resists learning isolated pieces of information that have no discernible pattern, such as telephone numbers, nonsense syllables, and isolated rules and conventions. "Emphasizing the storage and recall of unconnected facts is an inefficient use of the brain," state researchers Renate and Geoffrey Caine (1990).

Young children need to establish a rich, solid conceptual base from which all future learning will proceed (Kostelnik, 1992). Such a base enables children to make sense of their experience by forming connections between what they know and understand and the knowledge and concepts encountered in the new environment. Without this base, learning facts and isolated skills may resemble nonsense-syllable learning, often quickly mastered and

just as quickly forgotten. Early childhood educators are concerned that children have the capacity and opportunities to use their knowledge and skills within the context of meaningful activities, both inside and outside the classroom.

This approach to education does not imply that preschool and child-care teachers should merely set up the environment and then "sit out, afraid of getting in the way of children's individual construction of knowledge" (Pace, 1993, p. 4)—a "discovery learning" approach advocated by some followers of Piaget. Instead, based on increasing understanding of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, early childhood education is moving toward an approach characterized by "assisted discovery"—an active child and an active social environment collaborate to produce developmental change" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 108). In this view, learning and development are interrelated from the first day of life; education and other cultural forms of socialization lead the child along the developmental pathway to adulthood (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Language, of course, plays



a critical role in cognitive as well as social development.

**The importance of language.** Language, used first as a communicative tool, shapes thought; language shapes culture,

**ALTHOUGH CHILDREN WHO LEARN SKILLS IN ISOLATION** may successfully memorize the alphabet and improve their handwriting abilities, these activities often do little to engender an appreciation of reading, build vocabulary and concept formation, or help children express themselves through language.

and, as brain research has shown, language shapes brains (Healy, 1990). When teachers understand that reading is language, they can play a key role in collaborating with children

to optimize early literacy development. Recent research on how children become literate has documented many ways that caregivers and teachers can build on young children's emergent literacy abilities:

- Oral language development is nurtured through meaningful conversations with adults and peers, and through singing, dramatic play, and many opportunities to tell stories and to listen to and respond to stories told and read by adults.
- Print awareness (the awareness that print makes sense) is enhanced by creating an environment rich in print of all kinds, and with many opportunities for using and seeing print used in functional and creative ways.
- Phonemic awareness (awareness of the separate sounds in words) is encouraged through reading and rereading nursery rhymes, singing songs with rhyme and alliteration, enjoying tongue-twisters and other forms of language play (such as pig

Latin), encouraging the use of developmental spelling, and by drawing children's attention to letter/sound patterns in familiar words.

But, as Patsy Cooper (1993) points out, a child's relationship to stories should be distinguished from "print awareness:" *"Relationships to both stories and writing extend this cognitive awareness of print to include an engagement of the heart as well as the mind"* (p. 11). A love of stories and writing is nurtured by responsive, caring adults who, in literacy expert Frank Smith's (1983) words, *invite* children into the "literacy club." By integrating literacy—oral, written, and aesthetic—into the everyday lives of young children, literacy becomes meaningful, relevant, and powerful.

## Conclusion

Research in how oral language develops has greatly influenced our understanding of how children learn written language. Because oral language is regarded as the cornerstone of reading development, literacy is viewed as beginning in caregiver-infant interactions. Oral and written language are seen as interrelated and developing simultaneously, each reinforcing and transforming the other. In this view, the underlying process of learning written and oral language is the same: Like oral language, written language is best learned through actual use in a social context.

Clearly, there are many paths to literacy. Conversations, singing, poetry, pretend play, painting and drawing, storytelling, story dramatization, looking at pictures, a print-rich environment, and reading stories all lead a child into literacy. By the end of the fourth year, many

children have mastered the skills commonly known as reading readiness: knowledge of colors and shapes; familiarity with the alphabet; the ability to read a few common words, signs, and labels and to write a few letters. But most children know far more about literacy than these popular benchmarks would indicate. With an average vocabulary of more than 5,000 words, familiarity with and love of stories and books, and a penchant for pretend play and poetic images, four-year-olds are well on their way to becoming confident readers and writers.

Child-care providers, preschool teachers, and parents and other caregivers can nurture the language development and

potential of all children by providing an environment rich in opportunities for meaningful experiences of all kinds. Bev Bos, preschool director, author, and workshop presenter and keynote speaker, writes passionately of children's need for a wide base of experiences:

Before reading, children need experiences with wind, dirt, mud, water, experiences with other children, grandparents, running, walking, flowers, books, smells, gardens, balls, soft things, hard things, music, moving trains—to name just a few. Children need experiences—short, happy experiences—with grocery stores, libraries, bookstores. Children need experiences with wood, building, rolling, swinging, clouds, rain. And they need to talk about them, ask questions, point, make noise—in short, to use language with all of their experiences (1983, p. 16).





# Supporting Early Literacy: The Primary Years

*To become good readers children first need help in installing the cognitive and language furnishings that will make the brain a comfortable place for real literacy to dwell! (Healy, 1990).*

## Introduction

If you ask someone the question "What do you remember about learning to read?" the answer is likely to center on sounding out and recognizing words. In our society, the ability to decode exact sounds and words is not only seen as a critical skill in learning to read, it is often viewed as synonymous with reading. Yet, as we have seen in the first chapter, learning to read has its roots in the earliest interactions between children and caregivers. Long before children are able to match print with sound, they are using language to reason, reflect, imagine, respond, analyze, observe, compare, infer, empathize, share experiences and ideas, and solve problems. Later, when children are expected to understand and synthesize increasingly complex texts, these same critical-thinking skills will

**LONG BEFORE CHILDREN ARE ABLE TO MATCH PRINT** with sound, they are using language to reason, reflect, imagine, respond, analyze, observe, compare, infer, empathize, share experiences and ideas, and solve problems.

be called into play. The five-year-old who makes up her own stories, invents new rhymes, writes pretend messages, discusses books that have

been read to her, sings complex songs, and reads a book she has memorized is demonstrating that she has a great deal of knowledge about reading and writing.

Of course, children differ in their literacy histories. Differences in both the quality and quantity of children's spoken and written language environments in the early years often translate into substantial differences in the ease with which children learn to sound out words and to make sense of what they read (see pages 34-39 in this document). Fortunately, a rich body of reading research can inform the design of effective reading and writing programs. In particular, research on the literacy development of children who come from homes with rich oral and written language environments has helped us to understand how children make the critical transition from oral to written language, a transition that begins long before children begin formal schooling. In this chapter, this research and elements of a balanced literacy curriculum that support this critical transition are explored. Following is a brief sketch of some of the major insights into the reading process, gained over the past 20 years.

## Oral Language

■ Oral language provides the cornerstone of written language; speaking, listening, reading, and writing are all aspects of literacy and develop in an interdependent manner.

■ Proficiency in oral language is strongly correlated with later reading proficiency (Cambourne, 1987; Cohen, 1968; Healy, 1990; Loban, 1963; Schickedanz, 1986; Strickland, 1990).

■ Language develops through interactive engagements with responsive adults and peers (Bruner, 1986). The number of opportunities to engage in quality conversations has been identified as the most

critical factor in young children's linguistic and cognitive development (Phillips, 1987). Children need to talk as well as to listen (Healy, 1990).

### **Dramatic Play**

■ Dramatic play supports cognitive and linguistic development by providing opportunities for symbolic manipulation and verbal reasoning, and supports social development through social interaction and opportunities for collaborative problem solving (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

■ The fantasy and sociodramatic play of children can be viewed as a precursor to oral storytelling and story writing (Crowie, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). Many children

make up their first stories in the context of pretend play, creating and enacting their own dramatic narratives (and reenacting stories they have heard being read aloud) (McLane & McNamee, 1991).

■ Dramatizing stories can help link children's love of pretend play to more formal storytelling (Paley, 1988, p. 91). Acting out storybooks, songs, poetry, and children's own dictated stories aids the development of narrative skills. These

activities enhance overall intellectual performance and the generation of creative ideas, memory, and language competence,

particularly the capacity to reason theoretically (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

■ Both global and direct studies of the dramatic play/literacy connection have found that the social nature of play has a positive impact on measures of print knowledge, emergent storyreading, and story recall (Rowe, 1998).

### **Reading Aloud**

■ The opportunity to listen to (and discuss) stories during the preschool and primary school years is strongly correlated with successful literacy development (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995; Riley, 1994; Schickedanz, 1986; Wells, 1986).



■ Listening to and discussing stories benefit children's oral and written language development in many ways. These activities: build vocabulary and attention span;

enhance memory, imagination, concept knowledge, and listening skills; help children think in more complex, abstract, and creative ways; broaden children's range of experience; help children learn the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories or narrative text; and aid phonological awareness through alliteration and rhyme (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1988; Schickedanz, 1986; Wells, 1986).

■ The familiarity that comes from repeated readings of books enables children to reenact stories and to "read" stories before they can decode many words. Repeated readings result in more interpretative responses and help children pay more attention to print and story structure (Martinez & Roser, 1991; Sulzby, 1985).

### **Comprehension**

■ The ultimate purpose of reading is comprehension (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1995). Comprehension is a complex process that involves knowledge, experience, thinking, and feeling (Fielding & Pearson, 1994).

■ Comprehension involves the integration of new information with existing knowledge and understandings (Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986). In order to make sense of what they read and what is read to them, children must see the connections between what they already know and what is read (Sweet, 1993).

■ Comprehension is dependent on two kinds of prior knowledge—overall knowledge and knowledge of print. There is a strong statistical relationship between prior knowledge and reading-comprehension ability (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Squire, 1983).

■ Vocabulary knowledge is strongly correlated with reading skill. Readers acquire word meaning during reading by making inferences, using context and syntax (sentence structure). Consequently, good vocabulary programs must do more than establish an associational link between a word and its meaning through direct instruction; they must teach how to reason from language (Beck & Carpenter, 1986).

■ Research has demonstrated a strong positive statistical relationship between the amount of time spent reading (and being read to) and reading comprehension, increases in vocabulary growth, and concept knowledge. The bulk of vocabulary growth occurs not via direct instruction but in the process of reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Morrow, 1992; Stanovich, 1986; Wells, 1986).

### **Engagement**

■ Engagement in the reading process is a critical factor in comprehension. In order for children to understand stories that they read or that are read to them, children must actively engage with the text. Understanding written text requires active and sustained work on connecting ideas (Healy, 1990).

■ Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of emergent motivation defines engagement as a balance between challenges and the ability to respond. Children should be given materials to read at their instructional level, neither so challenging that anxiety and frustration overwhelm their efforts nor so easy that nothing new is learned (Speigel, 1995). However, most young children can *listen* to and *understand* complex story lines. Listening to

stories at a level that is more advanced than a child's independent reading level encourages engagement and builds listening and comprehension skills.

■ Because motivation to read is essential to engagement (Braunger & Lewis, 1997), learning to read and write requires active participation in activities that have meaning in the child's daily life (Strickland, 1990).



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■ The amount of time that children *choose* to spend reading is enhanced by a combination of opportunities for social interaction, an abundance of high-quality reading materials, allowing children to choose reading material of interest to them, and teacher emphasis on free reading (Morrow, 1992; Ng, Guthrie, McCann, Van Meter, & Alap, 1996; Sweet, 1993).

■ True engagement involves the ability to enter into the world of the story—to imagine a setting, to interpret a plot, to build relationships with characters, and to visualize or “see” what is being read. Readers who cannot visualize their reading are unlikely to want to read (Eisner, 1992; Enciso, 1992; Wilhelm, 1995). Asking children to create visual art as a response to reading and using picture books helps children to construct rich mental models as they read (Wilhelm, 1995).

■ Students' participation, engagement, and involvement play a critical role in their decision to stay in school (Finn & Cox, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Deyhle, 1992).

### **The Relationship**

#### **Between Reading and Writing**

■ Research shows that when reading and writing are taught together, the benefits are greater than when they are taught separately. When children write words, they attend to the details of those words. As a result, writing leads to improved phonemic awareness and word recognition. Reading leads to better writing performance, and combined instruction leads to improvements in both areas (Pikulski, 1994; Tierney & Shannahan, 1991).

■ When reading and writing are taught together in the context of meaningful activities, children are required to use a higher level of thinking than when either process is taught alone (McGinley & Tierney, 1989).

■ When children have opportunities to write their own stories, to read their own and others' stories, and to write in response to reading and art, they are able to employ much of their knowledge of reading in meaningful and purposeful ways (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).

#### **Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Knowledge**

■ Phonemic awareness is not synonymous with phonics. Phonemic awareness is by definition an “ear” skill (Healy, 1990), an understanding of the structure of *spoken* language. In learning to read and write alphabetic language, phonemic awareness is a prerequisite for understanding that

letters stand for the sounds in spoken words. Phonics knowledge is knowing the relationship between specific, printed letters (including combinations of letters) and specific, spoken sounds. Without phonemic awareness, children are unlikely to benefit from explicit phonics instruction (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986).

■ However, both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge are enhanced by reading (and being read to), writing, and speaking. Children develop phonemic awareness as a result of the oral and written language they are exposed to during their preschool and primary school years. Books and songs with rhymes and alliteration, and language play such as pig Latin, play a large role in this development. Writing also plays a part. When children are allowed and encouraged to

1990; Cunningham & Allington, 1994; Schickedanz, 1986).

■ While some children seem to learn to match print to sound “naturally,” with little explicit instruction, many children need some explicit phonics instruction (Adams, 1990).

■ By grade four, the relationship between phonics knowledge (alone) and successful reading no longer shows a strong correlation (although still critical) (Beck & Carpenter, 1986; Chall, 1983).

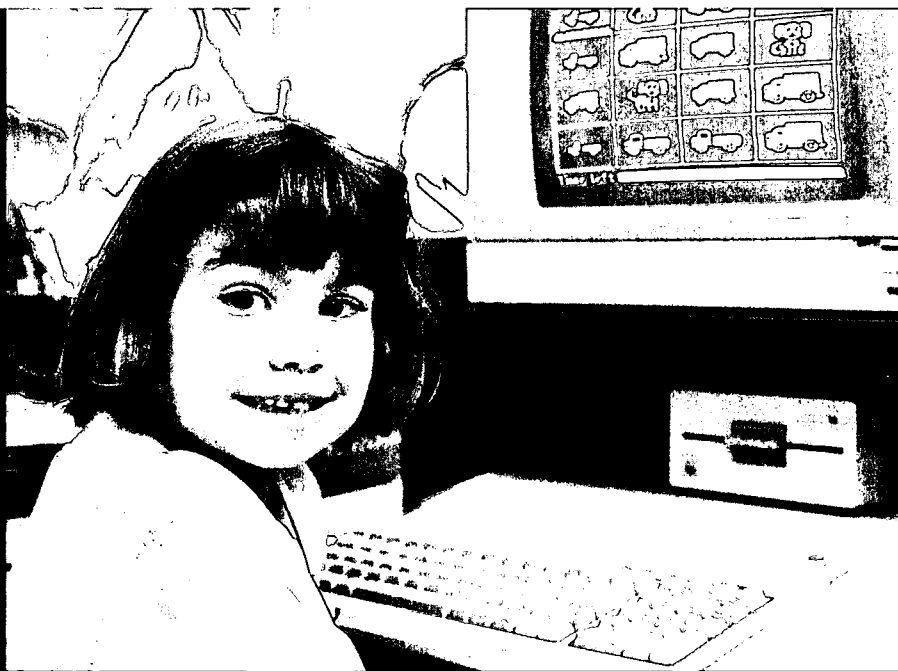
■ Researchers hypothesize that as reading matter becomes more difficult, overall language skills relate more to reading than decoding ability (although decoding ability continues to play a crucial role) (Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Chall & Jacobs, 1983; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Pearson, 1997). Many long-term studies

show that children superior in oral language in kindergarten and first grade are the ones who eventually excel in reading and writing in the middle grades (Healy, 1990).

Clearly, the insights gained over the last 20 years can provide a great deal of guidance for educators of young children. A growing body of research high-

create spellings from their emerging understanding of sounds and print, phonemic awareness and understanding of the alphabetic principal is promoted (Adams,

lights the importance of providing many meaningful experiences to support children's emergent literacy. However, the overriding importance of helping children learn to crack the sound-print code some-





times creates tensions for educators who strive to provide a balanced literacy curriculum for all children.

## Beginning Real School

As the first chapter showed, many children enter school filled with poetic images and unique word usage and are attuned to the different types of rhyming patterns, formats, and metaphoric imagery of poetry. Such statements as “I’m running back and forth as fast as the sky and faster than the clouds” (from Vivian Paley’s *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*, 1990), and the description dictated by a young painter to her mother—“The guy who went up the steep hill nicken and then he fell down and hurt his nicken on the schnoks and the nicks” (Engel, 1996/97)—demonstrate that many children enjoy using language in creative ways. At a Northwest child-development center, a four-year-old, inspired by poetry books given to her by her grandfather, wrote this response to a picture of a blue heron. She entitled it “Green:”

Birds are colorful.  
The rainbow that’s not there.  
Why do I wonder “why” everyday?  
Because I can’t remember why.  
Birds like rainbows—flutter in the sky.  
But where is the rainbow?

Undoubtedly, teachers who work with young children can think of many such examples. Yet all too often these poetic images disappear as children undergo “proper” language training. Because of the importance of phonics knowledge in learning to read, first grade is considered

by most educators as a time when the instructional focus should be on learning decoding skills. Often, children are not expected to use language creatively; rather, they may spend much of their time sounding out isolated words and copying letters and sentences.

Some researchers, such as Siegfried Engelmann and Doug Carnine of the University of Oregon, believe that putting basic skills first lays the foundation for stronger critical thinking later. In their direct instruction program, beginning reading consists of “meticulously scripted lessons, phonics drills, and teacher-led instruction” (Learn, 1998). While not all proponents of a basic-skills emphasis in the early grades adhere to such strictly defined skill training, many educators are looking toward a return to a basic-skills curriculum as a way to meet the goal of educating all children to high standards (Learn, 1998; Pearson, 1997).

**YET, ALL TOO OFTEN THESE POETIC IMAGES** disappear as children undergo “proper” language training.

## Fourth-Grade Slump

As stated earlier, research strongly supports the importance of some explicit phonemic awareness instruction, particularly for children who have had little exposure to reading and writing. Despite vast differences in children’s language experiences, by concentrating on specific decoding skills and observable behaviors, schools have been successful in establishing a minimum literacy level for most children (Squire, 1983). Because the ability to recognize printed letters and to sound out words is often the focus of reading instruction, children who have



had few experiences with reading and writing in the preschool years often score at grade level or above on standardized tests in grade two.

However, reading achievement often begins to decline between grades four and six, a phenomenon often referred to as the "fourth-grade slump." In particular, below average readers who also come from low-SES families tend to decelerate earlier and to a greater extent, dropping further and further behind their grade expectations (Chall, 1969; 1983). Chall and Jacobs (1983) reported that children in their study "had a good start in word meaning in grade two, but this competency was first to go into an early and strong deceleration" (p. 623).



As breadth of vocabulary and the ability to reason verbally—to follow a complex plot or argument, to analyze, and to remember what has been read—become more important than decoding skill, children with little exposure to stories and to other reading and writing activities in the early years often fall behind their more advantaged peers (Chall & Jacobs, 1983; Morrow, 1988; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). Thus, early strong scores in reading on standardized tests may not

provide a balanced picture of reading potential. Rather, the test scores may simply be a measure of children's success in basic decoding, a necessary but insufficient reading skill (Beck & Carpenter, 1986; Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1995). The 1986 NAEP report found that students' related problems in reading and expressing ideas in writing stem mainly from difficulty with verbal reasoning (Healy, 1990).

Because children from low-income families, in particular, may spend most of their primary years practicing isolated sounds and letters, they may miss out on a print- and story-rich environment experienced by their more advantaged peers. Pearson (1997) refers to putting the lowest achieving students into a less challenging curriculum as the "basic-skills conspiracy":

First you gotta get all the words right and facts straight before you can do the "what ifs" and "I wonder whats." Lots of these students spend their entire school careers getting the words right and the facts straight, and they never get to the "what ifs" and the "I wonder whats" of the more challenging curriculum—the curriculum that prepares them for the world of work, public discourse, and personal challenge (p. 5).

Unfortunately, in such an environment, as Bolo and Jenness (1984) observe, "the rich enthusiasm and readiness for real reading and writing is traditionally lost, not because we expect too much; rather, that in education we often settle for too little" (p. 3). A number of studies

have found that children in literature-based, integrated language arts classrooms have a more "positive disposition" for learning: That is, they are more motivated to read and write, more persistent, and more active in the use of learning strategies than those in traditional classrooms (Freppon, 1995; Holbrook, 1981; Shapiro & White, 1991; Turner, 1995; Morrow, 1992). Freppon (1995) studied children who entered second grade with a similar disposition for learning, defined as motivation and a positive sense of self. These terms included learners' talk and action as readers and writers themselves, their interest in and engagement with what they could and would do in reading and writing, and their self-initiated and sustained literacy interactions.

One group of children entered a traditional skills-based program, while the other children continued in a literature-based second grade. Freppon (1995) found that, while there were no statistical differences in pre- and poststandardized test scores, children in the skills-based group developed patterns of passivity and lost literate behaviors, such as choosing and persisting in reading and writing activities on their own. They frequently deferred personal knowledge and focused on rote-like completion of tasks, rather than exhibiting any interest in reading and writing.

Because the amount of time spent reading is strongly correlated with reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, and concept knowledge, this lack of interest in literacy activities is a cause for concern. But more importantly, a number of studies have shown that students' engagement, participation, and self-efficacy are critical in successful completion of school



(Deyhle, 1992; Finn & Cox, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

### Research on Brain Development

Brain research helps explain why spending so much time getting the words straight and the facts right in the early years does not, in Healy's (1990) words, "help to install the cognitive and language furnishings that will make the brain a comfortable place for real literacy to dwell." The years between three and 10, described as "years of promise" by the 1996 Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, are a time of rapid development of social, linguistic, cognitive, and physical competencies, corresponding with dramatic neurological changes (Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, 1996). Early experiences and interactions directly affect the way the brain is wired (see Handout 10). Because the brain is predisposed to search for how things make sense, strong connections are formed when children make meaning from their experiences (Caine & Caine, 1990).

At age 11, the brain begins to prune extra connections at a rapid rate. The cir-

cuitry or wiring that remains is more specific and efficient (Shore, 1997). The brain has been called the ultimate example of the saying “use it or lose it:” connections that are used repeatedly in the early years become permanent; those that are not are eliminated. By robbing children of the opportunity to develop higher-order critical-thinking skills—to reflect, analyze, synthesize, build relationships with characters, predict, and question—we may miss the window of opportunity that these years of promise provide.

It is not only children from low-SES families who suffer from the “basic skills conspiracy.” Studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s revealed that children spent more time on workbook assignments than on reading texts and that little time was spent actually reading texts (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1984; Fielding & Pearson, 1994). For example, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) studied 155 fifth-graders and found that

**BY ROBBING CHILDREN OF THE OPPORTUNITY** to develop higher-order critical-thinking skills—to reflect, analyze, synthesize, build relationships with characters in stories, predict, and question—we may miss the window of opportunity that these years of promise provide.

on most days, children did little or no book reading. The national commission that produced *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1984) cautioned that mastery learning

concepts, which overemphasize students’ knowledge of discrete, low-level reading skills, do little to help children actually read, defined by the commission as “a process of extracting meaning from text.”

Yet children in the intermediate and middle-school grades are often expected to read and write extended text at a

sophisticated level. Dyson (1987) asks, “Considering the focus on basic skills in the early school years, the academic ‘foundation’ for these tasks is difficult to identify. Where do these intellectual and verbal abilities come from? Do they originate from practice in the primary grades on letters, sounds, and memorization of facts?” (p. 398).

Of course, the ability to match print to sound is a crucial part of becoming an independent and fluent reader. Children also need to develop and maintain a positive disposition toward literacy and the ability to think critically and imaginatively. The challenge for teachers is to help children build a solid literacy foundation in the primary grades, one that provides not only basic skills, but also multiple opportunities to “get lost in a story”—to reflect, reason, and create “possible worlds” through stories and dramatic play, and to share experiences, ideas, and opinions.

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## Building a Solid Literacy Foundation

*Each baby brain comes into the world uniquely fitted out for various forms of academic pursuit, but its pedagogical prognosis is largely determined by the ongoing mental traffic that trains it how to think and learn. For children, habits of the mind soon become structures of the brain (Healy, 1990, p. 138).*

## Children Who Learn to Read and Write “Naturally”

Over the last 20 years, by studying the literacy development of children who

come from homes with rich oral and written language environments, we have learned a great deal about how children learn to read and write. In such homes, children's efforts at storytelling, reading, and writing are accepted with interest and enthusiasm and enhanced by adult questions and encouragement. Songs, nursery rhymes, and other forms of word-play build phonemic awareness and encourage the creative use of language. Adults and older siblings frequently read to themselves and out loud to infants and children, demonstrating the importance of literacy as well as its enjoyment.

Families of children who read and write early and "naturally" typically use a balanced approach to providing a literacy foundation. While they usually do not drill their children on isolated sounds and letters, neither do they simply give their children books and expect them to be able to read independently. Instead, like learning to talk, learning to read and write involves interaction with responsive adults who negotiate meaning with children. Bruner (1983) provides the following example of 22-month-old Richard's story-book reading.

Mother: What's that?

Richard: Ouse.

Mother: Mouse, yes. That's a mouse.

Richard: More mouse (*pointing to another picture*).

Mother: No, those are squirrels. They're like mice, but with long tails. Sort of.

Richard: Mouse, mouse, mouse.

Mother: Yes, all right, they're mice.

Richard: Mice, mice.

At first, as in this example, book reading consists primarily of looking at pictures and negotiating the names of squirrels, mice, hedgehogs, and other common and not-so-common objects and animals. Research suggests that being read to in itself may not be the only factor in enhancing literacy. Rather, it is the type and amount of verbal interaction between adult and child during storyreading that may influence literacy development (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Morrow, 1988). A number of adult interactive behaviors have been identified as beneficial to the cooperative construction of meaning between adults and children. They include: questioning, encouraging dialogue and children's responses, offering praise or positive feedback, giving or extending information, engaging in discussion, interpreting and making inferences, sharing personal reac-



tions, and connecting story elements to what a child already knows (Morrow, 1988; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Through the age of three, parents often encourage young children to interrupt stories with questions and comments, but by

the age of four, children are often expected to listen to the story from beginning to end, saving most questions until the completion of the story (Heath, 1982). From an interactive conversation, such as the one between Richard and his mother, children progress to listening to increasingly

**LONG BEFORE THEY CAN ACTUALLY READ PRINT,** children often “read” the illustrations of a book or a memorized rhyme or story to themselves, parents, friends, pets, and stuffed animals.

complex orally read monologues (Sulzby, 1985). Children, then, are introduced to written language in the context of a meaningful and

enjoyable interaction with an adult, often with a self-chosen book read from the comfort of a caregiver's lap. Holdaway (cited in Park, 1982) describes the three phases of experience through which a favorite book passes in the bedtime story:

First there is a successful introduction to the book for the purpose of enjoyment. There may be considerable participation and questioning by the child in a relaxed and unpressured way .... Second, the child demands many repetitions over the next few days or weeks—the “read-it-again” phenomenon .... Third, the child spends many happy hours independently with the favorite book, role-playing as reader and re-creating the familiar experience with increasing sophistication. (p. 816).

### **Storybook Reading by Children Who Are Not Yet Reading**

Through repeated readings, and with the help of illustrations and their growing understanding that print makes sense,

children develop their storybook-reading ability. Long before they can actually read print, children often “read” the illustrations of a book or a memorized rhyme or story to themselves, to parents, friends, pets, and stuffed animals. Increasingly, researchers consider storybook reading by children who are not yet reading an important part of literacy development (Hiebert, 1998; MacGillivray, 1997; Sulzby & Teale, 1991) (see Handout 11).

After reviewing the literature and listening to children from two to five years old read their favorite picture storybook, Sulzby (1985) developed broad categories for a classification scheme of patterns of young children's storybook-reading behaviors. Children's early attempts to read (when asked to read to an adult) are based on pictures, and stories are not yet formed. In this stage, children merely describe the pictures in a storybook without using book language. Next, children still rely on pictures, but stories are formed. These first reading attempts sound like oral language and may not closely follow the text.

Before children can decode the printed word, their storytelling becomes increasingly like written language. They progress from treating individual pages of storybooks as if they are discrete units to treating the book as the unit. In this stage, children weave stories across the book's pages, progressing from a mixture of oral and written language-like reading to “reading” that is quite similar to the original story. In these later stages, although the illustrations still may be needed to jog their memory of the story, children demonstrate that they are learning the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories by “talking like a book” (Clay, 1977). By



now, children who have been read to frequently have developed a number of expectations about stories; first and foremost, they expect a story to make sense.

Finally, children's attention begins to focus on print, as well as on illustrations. In the early stages of attending to the printed text, children may focus on a few known words, a few letters and associated sounds, or upon the remembered text (Sulzby, 1985). During these first stages of reading the printed word, children may use several strategies to keep stories meaningful, including reading word for word from a memorized or predictable book and telling stories from pictures when the print is too difficult to decode verbatim. MacGillivray (1997) reported that in her study of first-graders, children regularly switched strategies to meet different circumstances. For example, a reader might sound out every word while reading to a parent and then, when in front of peers, shift into a retelling to keep listening friends entertained.

**Early writing.** Writing, too, follows a developmental progression (see Handout 12). Children's early attempts at writing draw their attention to the details of words, leading to improved phonemic awareness and word recognition. At first, children may randomly string together letters, but as their phonemic awareness grows, they progress to using beginning consonants to represent a word. Next initial and final consonants may be used, followed by vowel/consonant combinations. Finally, children demonstrate their awareness of separate syllables by representing all syllables in the words they write. Standard spelling is the final stage. However,

just as children use a variety of strategies in reading, they often use a number of strategies to write, depending on the situation. Hiebert (1988) explains: "On a common task like writing their names, young children may use conventional spelling and handwriting. On a less familiar task, like writing a story, children may use drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, familiar letters (e.g., the first letter of their name), and invented spelling" (p. 164).



**The transition from oral to written language.** Although learning to read and write tends to follow the flexible developmental patterns described previously, caregivers do not wait for children to develop these skills on their own, a "ripening neurons" approach advocated by some followers of Gessell, an influential physician of the early 20th century. Rather, they *scaffold* their children's learning, a term introduced by Wood and his collaborators (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding is a flexible way to provide temporary, adjustable support to children's efforts that is sensitively tuned to their needs (Berk & Winsler, 1995). During a storybook reading, scaffolding may include strategies such as asking questions to assist problem solving, providing information (e.g.,



labeling objects), and reading only part of a story while allowing the child to “read” the predictable text, such as a refrain of a song.

By providing many relaxed, interactive experiences with reading and writing, children are helped to develop skills and strategies to understand written texts. In this way, children transition from *oral* language, which is face-to-face and interactive, to *written* language, which is more formal and lacks contextual cues such as gestures and intonation.

Researchers agree that reading comprehension draws heavily upon oral language skills. However, written language is not just oral language written down. “Written language, unlike oral language, must carry the total load of meaning without ambiguity. It is more formal, more complete, and more textured than spoken language” (Holdaway, 1979, p. 54), and is designed to have the composer and receiver removed in time and place from each other (Sulzby, 1985). Sulzby explains how caregivers help children acquire decontextualized language skills, which are associated with literacy and school achievement:

**WHILE STORYBOOK READING IS HELPING** children to make the important transition from oral to written language, it is also enhancing oral language and critical-thinking skills, imagination, and a love of reading.

Fortunately, young children who are read to before formal school are ushered into an understanding of the

relationships between oral and written language within a social context in which written language is used in hybridized fashion at first and then gradually takes on its more conven-

tional nature. This hybridized form is evident particularly in parent-child storybook interactions in which characteristics of oral language enter into the parents’ rendering of the “written text” (p. 460).

An example of a book reading provided by Strickland and Taylor (1989) demonstrates this hybrid form, which includes a mixture of verbatim reading of the text and conversational language. As the mother, Karen, reads *The Story of Babar* to her three-year-old daughter, Christina, she sensitively relates the extraordinary happenings in the life of an elephant in England to the everyday life of her little girl. These kinds of interactions help children use their knowledge to make sense of information from a book and show children how the information in the book can be related to their lives:

Karen tells Christina what is happening in the story. “He goes into the store,” she says, “and he goes into the elevator.” Karen points to the elevator and asks Christina, “Does this look like the old broken down elevator in Mommy’s office?”

“Yes,” replies Christina.

“But this one’s not broken,” Her mother says, “It goes up and down.” Karen returns to the story. “And the mans says, ‘This is not a toy, Mr. Elephant. You must get out and do your shopping’” (p. 28).

While storybook reading is helping children to make the important transition from oral to written language, it is also enhancing oral language and critical-thinking skills, imagination, and a love of reading.

Of course it is not only storybook reading that prepares children to read and write. Numerous and varied experiences with oral and written language lead a child into literacy (see pages 8-34 in this document). It is easy to see why years of child-centered conversations; singing; telling stories; listening to, talking about, memorizing, and acting out stories; drawing; writing mock messages; and pretending to read engender a rich enthusiasm and readiness for engagement in authentic reading and writing. With such a strong literacy foundation, many children are able to crack the print-sound code with little explicit instruction in their first year of school. As Sulzby (1985) points out, children who learn to read without formal instruction have often been described as teaching themselves to read from favorite storybooks. Making meaning from print is only another step, albeit an important one, in the enjoyable, meaningful, and gradual process of becoming literate.

However, when teachers begin reading instruction at the print level, children from disadvantaged literacy backgrounds are required to forego the stages of literacy development that more advantaged children experience. By trying to speed up the process of literacy development, we often fail to appreciate and allow opportunities for what Dyson (1987) describes as the "often messy, noisy, and colorful process of becoming literate" (p. 408). The result may be initial progress in learning to recognize and pronounce words, but at the expense of comprehension, verbal reasoning, and motivation to read.

Can the strategies and approaches that nurture literacy development in the homes of "well-read-to" children be effectively

transferred to a school setting? A small but growing body of research suggests that they can.

### **Research Support for Authentic Reading and Writing Activities**

Over the last 10 years, research on literacy development has increasingly included measures of literate behaviors as well as of literacy

skills. Dahl and Freppon (1995) and Freppon (1995) define literacy skills as the

concepts and behaviors that learners use to read and write, such as decoding, writing, spelling, and grammar. Literate behaviors include a broad range of behaviors and dispositions that are important for engagement in reading and writing:

- Learners reflecting on their own literate activity, such as talking about what they know how to do, what they are going to do next, and what they see as a challenge
- Using oral language to interact with written language by reacting to a story
- Explaining a piece of writing
- Describing a favorite book to another person
- Choosing and persisting in literacy interactions
- Valuing one's own experience and personal language and connecting them with written language
- Communicating about written language experiences

Following are brief summaries of a number of studies that compared children's literacy skills and behaviors in literature-based classrooms with children in more traditional, skills-based classrooms:

### **A NUMBER OF STUDIES**

**HAVE FOUND** that children in literature-based classrooms have a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers.

■ Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) found that low-SES children in whole-language classrooms with increased levels of storybook readings, book discussions, and opportunities to explore books and to write showed significantly greater growth in their knowledge of written language and more extensive breadth of knowledge of written linguistic features, when compared to a skills-based curriculum.

■ Morrow (1992) reported that second-graders from minority backgrounds who moved from a traditional to a literature-based classroom showed improvement in comprehension, the creation of original stories, motivation to read, and language complexity and vocabulary development.

ries, interactive storyreading, and recreational reading. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control groups on retelling stories, attempted reading of favorite stories, and comprehension tests. (The control groups followed the district-prescribed reading-readiness program, which emphasized letter recognition and letter-sound correspondence.) No significant differences existed between the groups on standardized measures of reading readiness.

■ Turner (1995) studied the effects of instructional contexts on first-grade children's motivation to engage in literacy activities. She found that children in literature-based, integrated language arts classrooms were more motivated, more

persistent, and more active in the use of learning strategies than those in traditional classrooms.

■ Dahl and Freppon (1995) found that low-SES kindergarten and first-grade children in whole-language classrooms used more strategies in both teacher-directed and inde-



■ Morrow, O'Connor, and Smith (1990) studied the effects of a storybook-reading program on the literacy development of at-risk kindergarten children. Children in four experimental classes followed a daily program of literature experiences that included reading for pleasure, retelling stories, repeated readings of favorite sto-

pendent contexts. Passivity appeared to be the most pervasive coping strategy for learners experiencing difficulty in skills-based classrooms. Field observation showed that skills-based learners "sat and stared for periods of time, marked randomly on worksheets just to finish them, and waited for or asked for help." Their

whole-language counterparts, in contrast, were persistent in their reading and highly active as they read independently. In addition, a considerably larger proportion of the children in the whole-language classrooms were writing sentences and stories by the end of first grade.

■ In a study by Manning, Manning, and Long (1989), children in the whole-language classroom were more likely to read for meaning, read with greater comprehension, and read with greater accuracy (not counting errors that resulted in no meaning loss).

■ Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) investigated the effects of reading a series-format many-volumed story to disadvantaged first-graders. Children who had been read to outscored children in the control classes on measures of decoding, reading comprehension, and active use of language.

■ Feitelson and colleagues (1984) found that kindergartners who had been read to had higher scores for understanding a story from a first-grade reader, attentiveness to picture clues and ability to infer a causal relationship from them, ability to tell a connected story from pictures, sentence complexity, and number of different words used in their stories.

■ Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) studied the out-of-school activities of 155 fifth-grade students. They found that among all the ways children spent their time, reading books was the best predictor of several measures of reading achievement, including gains in reading achievement over time. They found that among the things teachers do to promote reading are assuring access to interesting books at a suitable level of difficulty, using incentives to increase motivation for reading, read-

ing aloud to children, and providing time for reading during the school day.

■ In Kasten and Clarke's study (1989), whole-language kindergartners performed significantly better than their counterparts on all subtests of the Metropolitan Reading Tests, including those that measured phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge. Children in the whole-language classrooms were also more advanced as writers by the end of their kindergarten year.

In summary, based on standardized tests, children in classrooms that offer multiple opportunities to engage in authentic reading and writing activities appear to develop phonics knowledge, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well as or better than children in more traditional classrooms (McIntyre & Freppon, 1994; Stice & Bertrand, 1990). Children in literature-based classrooms seem more inclined to read for meaning, achieve higher scores on tests of reading comprehension, develop more strategies for dealing with problems in reading, and tend to use phonics knowledge more effectively than children in more traditional classrooms where skills are practiced in isolation (Freppon, 1991, 1991; Weaver, Gilmeister-Krause, & Vento-Zogby, 1996).

In addition, a number of studies have found that children in literature-based classrooms have a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers (Freppon, 1995; Morrow, 1992; Stice & Bertrand, 1990). Dahl and Freppon (1995) reported that children in a literature based classroom were more likely to become personally involved in reading and writing, value their own experience and personal language and connect them with written lan-

guage, and talk about and reflect on their written language experiences. Dahl and Freppon (1995) concluded, "When learners see their own experiences as valid

although the appeal of being able to decode the exact sounds and words of texts increased as their awareness of the importance of these skills grew, children in this litera-

ture-based classroom rarely spent time sounding out words if it interfered with the creation of a meaningful story. Instead, they skipped a difficult word or substituted another word that "made sense" in the context of the story.

Does this mean that children will continue to use these strategies



knowledge and use reading and writing for their own purposes, the journey toward literate behaviors is soundly under way" (p. 71).

### **The Strategies of "Well-Read-To" Children: Help or Hindrance in Learning to Read?**

We have seen that children in families that engage in many meaningful literacy activities go through a series of flexible stages in their attempts to make meaning from text. Before children understand that print represents words, they tell stories from pictures and memorize texts through repeated readings of rhyming and predictable books. MacGillivray (1997) reported that first-graders in her study progressively attended more to the parts of language (individual words and letters) as their abilities increased. However,

at the expense of learning to sound out words? Because rapid and automatic decoding ability is the hallmark of proficient readers, some researchers view these early attempts at reading with alarm. Philip Gough of the University of Texas observes that "skilled readers simply look at print and effortlessly and automatically recognize the word on the page .... How do I know this? Well, in the first place, studies of eye movements tell us that the skilled reader fixates on or near every word in the passage. That is to say, skilled readers do not skip words; they look at every word" (1997, p. 3). Doug Carnine of the University of Oregon agrees:

Whole language is fine in some ways, but not for beginning readers. The concept comes out of a theory that learning to read is as natural as



learning to speak. Just immerse the kids and motivate them—encourage them to guess from context or pictures instead of learning to sound out words—and they'll learn to read just fine—except an awful lot of them don't. Actually the strategies this approach encourages are precisely the strategies you find disabled readers using. That's what so shocking (Raspberry, 1998).

Yet many children learn to read with little formal instruction by teaching themselves to read from favorite storybooks. If the strategies “well-read-to” young children employ (using pictures and context, repeated readings, memorizing text, and pretending to read) in their early attempts at reading are “precisely the strategies you find disabled readers using,” how can they lead to proficiency in reading? The answer lies in the developmental nature of learning to read. Researchers who use an adult definition of proficiency to evaluate the reading strategies of young children begin at the end of a long journey toward literacy. If we were to apply adult ideals to other developmental competencies, such as learning to walk and talk, we would never allow children to experiment, practice, and make approximations toward a final goal.

For example, we know that good walkers walk confidently with one foot in front of the other; they don't hold on to coffee tables; they don't balance themselves with their arms held out; they rarely stumble. Good talkers articulate words in a clear fashion; they speak in well-formed sentences; they usually think before they speak and consider their audience.

However, children *learning* to walk *do* stumble (and pick themselves up), frequently hold on to coffee tables, and do hold their arms out for balance (which adds to the “toddler” effect). Children who will *become* proficient talkers usually begin with word approximations (which often only a caregiver can interpret), gradually learn to articulate single words before putting two words together, overgeneralize meanings (e.g., mouse for squirrel) and overgeneralize rules for plurals and past tense (deers for deer and bited for bit). As stated in the first chapter, Cambourne (1987) observed that in his three-year study of parent/child interactions, no parents expected their children to use the correct form as soon as they heard it:

They knew that “baby” talk may persist for weeks, that goed and comed and other immature attempts at communication would continue until

the child decided to change.

No exasperated pressure of the kind:

“Look, I've modeled the

auxiliary a dozen times now—when will you get it right?” was ever given (p. 8).

Young children, then, are not expected by their caregivers to display full-blown competence from the beginning in achieving developmental accomplishments. They are typically allowed to make many mistakes, to *approximate* the desired model. They are allowed *temporary*, adjustable help (scaffolds): coffee tables to support walking, training wheels on bikes, life

**RESEARCHERS WHO USE AN ADULT DEFINITION** of proficiency to evaluate the reading strategies of young children begin at the end of a long journey toward literacy.



jackets for swimming, and a supportive caregiver who idealizes and expands on their early communicative attempts (see pages 15-16 in this document). Similarly, young children who read early and well are allowed and encouraged to develop

**IF TRADITIONAL EDUCATORS HAVE OVERESTIMATED** the extent to which written learning requires formal instruction, some proponents of whole language have overestimated the degree to which learning to read and write is like learning to talk.

and use many strategies to make sense of text. Weaver and her colleagues (1996) explain: Just because emergent readers need scaffolding does not mean they will forever be dependent upon other readers or upon predictable texts and contexts. These scaffolds are a lot like training wheels for learning to ride a bike or water wings for learning to swim. Such temporary supports can be crucial for some children (p. 5).

Cambourne (1995) identified six additional "conditions of learning" that must be in place for optimal oral language learning to occur, conditions that he believes are equally applicable to literacy learning in the classroom. They include: immersion in text, numerous demonstrations of how texts are constructed and used, high expectations, learner responsibility, opportunity for children to use and practice their developing control of language, and feedback from exchanges with more knowledgeable people.

## **Learning to Read:**

### **Somewhat of an Unnatural Act**

Despite the strong emphasis by most proponents of whole language on the importance of environmental support for literacy development, some educators have interpreted a developmental view of literacy to mean that children learn written language the way they learned to talk, with little or no explicit instruction. In particular, some educators de-emphasized phonics instruction. However, research is clear that many children *do* need some explicit instruction in phonics in order to become proficient readers. Even with the advantages of a story-rich environment in the early years, learning to read remains somewhat of an "unnatural act" (Gough & Hillinger, 1980).

If traditional educators have overestimated the extent to which written learning requires formal instruction, some proponents of whole language have overestimated the degree to which learning to read and write is like learning to talk. Although all children (in the absence of severe disability) learn to use language in a functional way, merely placing children in a "print-rich" environment does not ensure acquisition of reading and writing skills and behaviors. Some instruction in decoding, spelling, and punctuation is usually necessary. Regie Routman and Andrea Butler (1995) explain:

We believe that in the name of "whole language" and "literature-based instruction," some educators and publishers went too far. Thinking all children would learn to read "naturally" if they were immersed in quality literature, many abandoned formal instruction. In particular, the

explicit instruction of phonics became suspect. But good teachers have never abandoned phonics. They always acknowledged that phonics had an important place in the reading and writing process without being an end in itself ....

Reading must always be viewed as a meaning-making process; it is not just decoding. Emotional and political issues seem to have clouded the picture and made phonics a dirty word. But phonics does need to be taught. It's all a matter of balance ....

### **A Balanced Curriculum: Avoiding the Instructional Cuisinart**

Balance is a word that is often invoked to describe an optimal literacy curriculum for young children. But when practitioners strive for balance, can they avoid an eclectic approach that offers little coherence in its philosophy and practices, an

approach described by Bialostok (1997) as the "instructional Cuisinart: a little bit of phonics and a little whole language?" Many educators believe that they can. Pearson (1997) cautions, however, that "balance is not about negotiating a compromise between two adversarial positions." Instead, "balance is about seeking that optimal mix of practices that can be supported by converging evidence and practice, resulting in a coherent, flexible curriculum available to ALL students."

While there is still disagreement about the best *approach* to reading instruction, few disagree that comprehension is the ultimate *purpose* of reading (Stanovich, 1986). Because engagement in the reading process is a critical factor in comprehension, an essential feature of literacy instruction in the primary years is to help children develop and maintain a positive disposition toward reading and writing. True engagement involves the ability to



enter into the world of the story—to imagine a setting, to interpret a plot, to build relationships with characters, to visualize or “see” what is being read. Enciso (1992) described engagement in reading as:

... Our entry into the world of the story and the intense involvement we feel as we imagine and interpret the characters, setting, events, and thematic possibilities of literacy texts. It includes a complex interplay of imaginative and intellectual processes that are typically private and elusive, yet critical to comprehension and pleasure in reading (p. 1).

Clearly, a vast array of skills, knowledge, and dispositions are necessary for success in reading and writing. Based on research on the environment of children who learn to read easily and well, as well as research that examines effective classroom curricula, a number of elements of effective literacy curricula for primary-age children have been identified, including:

1. Teaching for understanding and learning as understanding
2. Schools as caring communities
3. A “print-rich” environment
4. Reading aloud, discussing stories, and independent reading
5. Teacher demonstrations of skills and strategies for decoding
6. Dictating and acting out stories
7. Opportunities to write, with various levels of support
8. Using projects to integrate literacy into all aspects of the classroom, including art and music
9. Monitoring children’s progress

These elements are discussed in the following section.

## Elements of a Balanced Curriculum

*Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn (Malaguzzi, 1993).*

### 1. Teaching for Understanding and Learning as Understanding

Emergent literacy, which is based on principles of cognitive psychology and linguistics, is compatible with our growing understanding that the life of a child is a learning experience. Strickland (1990) sums up key elements of an emergent-literacy perspective.

- Learning to read and write begins early in life and is ongoing
- Learning to read and write are interrelated processes that develop in concert with oral language
- Learning to read and write requires active participation in activities that have meaning in the child’s daily life
- Learning to read and write involves interaction with responsive others
- Learning to read and write is particularly enhanced by shared-book experiences

In this view, children, rather than passively receiving knowledge and information from adults, actively strive to make sense of their experience from the moment they are born. Over the last half-century, research from a variety of disciplines—education, cultural anthropology, psychology, brain research, and linguistics—has

provided support for approaches to education that build on this insight. Drawing on the theories of Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, and Vygotsky, most early childhood educators advocate an approach to teaching that emphasizes understanding over rote learning.

Piaget's view of the child as actively striving to make sense of his or her world was revolutionary when it first reached the United States in the middle of the 20th century. His views stood in contrast to the behaviorist view of the child as passive—a vessel to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. For Piaget, the child's development was the result of exploration, practice, and experimentation in conjunction with feedback from the environment. To ask how one could hasten development was to ask "*la question Americaine*" (Bruner, 1986, p. 141).

In contrast, Vygotsky believed that learning and development are interrelated from the first day of life (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84). Formal education and other cultural forms of socialization are key in leading the child along the developmental pathway to adulthood. While Piaget emphasized the individual construction of knowledge by the child (as the child interacts with the social and physical environment), Vygotsky believed that all knowledge is socially constructed. Vygotsky's sociocultural (or social-constructivist) framework draws attention to the social nature of learning and the pivotal role of the caregiver or teacher in assisting the child to reach a higher level of learning and development. In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978) Vygotsky wrote, "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which chil-

dren grow into the intellectual life around them ... the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development."

In this environment, the primary role of the teacher is neither to dispense information nor to rely solely on the child's maturation. Rather, it is to enhance children's development and learning by collaborating with children in joint activities that are chosen to fit the child's level of *potential* development, or to use Vygotsky's term, the "zone of proximal development." The zone of proximal development is the hypothetical dynamic region in which learning



and development take place. It is defined by the distance between what a child can accomplish during *independent* problem solving and what he or she can accomplish with the *help* of an adult or more competent peer. The idea of the *scaffold*, introduced by Wood and his colleagues (1976), builds on this concept.

In this educational approach based on scaffolding children's learning, both adults and more competent peers play important roles in children's literacy development:

**CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT** is not a frill to be addressed only after the basics are attended to; for young children, such an environment is essential for learning.

An *active child* and an *active social environment* collaborate to produce developmental change (Vygotsky, 1978). Glennellen Pace

(1993) describes the role of the teacher in a classroom based on social-constructivist theory:

This is not a *laissez-faire* approach. As the teacher, you are a central player, not someone who "sits-out," afraid of "getting in the way of" students' knowledge construction. But neither is this approach teacher centered, where your meanings are the meanings students must "get." Instead, you play multiple roles: demonstrator, mediator, keen observer, and listener (p. 4).

Teachers play a crucial role in making literacy meaningful and relevant:

- Because young children naturally want to imitate the behavior of significant adults, teachers model their appreciation of reading and writing by engaging in these activities
- Teachers encourage children to connect reading and writing with their own knowledge and understandings and help children to become aware of how much they already know about reading and writing
- Children are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, and

teachers convey to children that they *expect* them to learn to read and write

**Teacher expectations.** Several studies have found long-term effects of first-, second-, and third-grade teachers' expectations on children's performance in high school and beyond (Entwisle, 1995). Teachers' expectations for children's success have been shown to have both direct and indirect influences on achievement. Directly, teacher perceptions can affect placement of children in ability groups. Once the child has been assigned to an ability group, Entwisle (1995) explains, "real consequences begin to follow:"

Placement in reading groups effectively determines the amount and type of instruction children receive; it influences group process (interruptions and disruptions); and it affects how children are viewed by parents and teachers .... Indirect effects come about when the teacher influences the first-grader's own attitudes toward achievement, which are then carried forward within the child" (pp. 133-144).

In the early school years, then, children develop patterns of learning and patterns of reliance on significant others to support learning that directly affect later attainment (Entwisle, 1995). Children's self-images, in large part, are based on their perceptions of how acceptable they are in the eyes of significant adults (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Sroufe, 1979). Because the disposition to learn depends on a positive sense of self, teaching for understanding includes paying careful attention

to children's interpretations of themselves as learners.

In a study by Graue (1992), a six-year-old boy's words illustrate how teachers' judgments in the early school years may shape a child's self-image in a way that may seriously constrain his or her future ability to learn. When asked what skills are needed to succeed in first grade, the child replied, "Read and be good and sit down and be still .... If you don't know how to be good then you'll be a bad boy. Then you'll have to wish that you were good .... Nobody will want you if you're a bad kid." More than what districts mandate, more than what teachers teach, it is how children interpret their role as learners that determines what and how they learn. Creating a psychologically safe environment is not a frill to be addressed only after the basics are attended to; for young children, such an environment is essential for learning.

## 2. Schools as Caring Communities

*Highlight my strengths and my weaknesses will disappear (a Maori saying).*

Research on school restructuring has identified a number of commitments and competencies that lead to improved outcomes for children, including:

- High expectations for all children (Newmann, 1993; Benard, 1993; Nieto, 1994)
- A commitment to learn from and about children, building on the strengths and experiences that children bring to school (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meier, 1995)

■ Working collaboratively with families and the community

■ The development of schools as a caring community (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995; Meier, 1995; Newmann, 1993)

Caring communities are defined by Lewis, Schaps, and Watson (1995) as "places where teachers and students care about and support each other, actively participate in and contribute to activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging and identification, and have a shared sense of purpose and common values." The factory-model school, with an emphasis on competition, hierarchical authority, and a view of teachers and principals as

interchangeable parts, still exerts a strong influence on our educational system.

However, based on a synthesis of literature about human growth and development, Argyris (cited in Clark & Astuto, 1994) concluded that hierarchical, bureaucratic work environments are more likely to lead to immature behaviors, such as passivity, dependence, and lack of self-control and awareness. In contrast, schools organized as caring communities have been shown to foster a shared sense of responsibility, self-direction, experimentation, respect for individual differences, and high expectations (Clark & Astuto, 1994; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1995; Newmann, 1993).





A central goal of such schools is, in a Northwest principal's words, "to create a positive school climate as seen through the eyes of the child." (see pages 119-131 in this document) To do so requires not only careful attention to interactions and relationships between teachers and children, but throughout the school and community as well. Researchers have consistently found that in order for teachers to facilitate higher-order thinking and a love of learning in children, they too must have ample opportunities to address their own questions and concerns regarding educational practices. Learning new ways of teaching requires time for observation, reading, reflection, dialogue with colleagues, and support for these practices at the district, state, and federal levels. Fostering a shared sense of responsibility for children's learning means that families play a crucial role in the school community.

**Partnerships with families.** Three decades of research have demonstrated strong links between parental involvement in education and school achievement (Riley, 1994). Perhaps the most powerful form of parental involvement

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occurs when parents are actively engaged with their children at home in ways that enhance learning (see Handout 13 for ways that schools can involve families in literacy

activities). By encouraging and providing opportunities for meaningful family involvement, schools play a critical role in

bridging the gulf between home and school. "Just as with kids, it all goes back to the relationship," explains Debbie Fagnant, a teacher in a Northwest school. "It's the same with parents. Parents will be connected to school if they feel comfortable with us, their children's teacher. Establishing that relationship is a big part of our job" (Novick, 1996).

Cummins (1986) argues that previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful because the relationships between teachers and students and between schools and communities have remained essentially unchanged. He cites an example of a successful project in Britain involving children from multiethnic communities, many of whose parents did not read English or use it at home. Yet the researchers found that simply having children read to their parents on a regular basis resulted in dramatic changes in children's progress in reading, surpassing children who received extra instruction from an experienced, qualified reading specialist.

The researchers also found that, almost without exception, parents welcomed the project, agreed to hear their children read, and completed a record card showing what had been read. The teachers involved with the home collaboration found the work with parents worthwhile, and they continued to involve parents with subsequent classes after the experiment was concluded. Teachers reported that children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved.

**Culturally responsive teaching.** As this example shows, increasing the continuity and congruence between children's

home experiences and the school environment is particularly critical to the success of children from diverse cultures and social classes. It is now well understood that the absence of continuity and congruence between the child's home culture and the school—an absence of shared meaning—may interfere with children's competent functioning in the new setting (Bowman & Stott, 1994).

Although bilingual and bicultural children have the potential to enrich the classroom environment with diverse ways of seeing and understanding, their discourse and literacy styles are often seen as a liability. Utilizing the expertise of teachers, parents, and other community members of diverse cultural and linguistic groups can do much to counter the deeply held and often unconscious biases that may cause us to value only one way of talking, understanding, and behaving. Children and teachers of the dominant culture can learn from children from diverse cultures, enhancing their own lives and their ability to "become citizens of the global community" (Delpit, 1995, p. 69).

A number of studies have found that when children's language and culture are incorporated into the school program, widespread school failure does not occur. Cummins (1986) points out that the most successful bilingual programs appear to be those that emphasize and use children's primary (home) language. He suggests that "students' school success appears to reflect both the more solid cognitive/academic foundation developed through intensive primary language instruction and the reinforcement (rather than devaluation) of their cultural identity" (p. 25). Research on the language of young children has found:

■ Contrary to popular belief, young children develop proficiency—which is not the same as fluency—in a second language slowly, over a five- to seven-year period (Wolfe, 1992). Young children who are forced to give up their primary language and adjust to an English-only environment may not only lose their first language, but may not learn the second language well (Fillmore, 1991).

■ When children have only a partial command of two languages, they may mix both languages in what Selenker (1972) called "fossilized versions of inter-languages," rather than fully formed versions of the target languages (cited in Fillmore, 1991). This inability to speak any language with proficiency puts children at high risk for school failure.

■ The loss of the heritage language can seriously jeopardize children's relationship with their families, who may not be fluent in English. The inability to communicate with family members has serious consequences for the emotional, social, and cognitive development of linguistically diverse children (Cummins, 1986; Wolfe, 1992; Fillmore, 1991).

■ Students taught to read their home language and then transition to English ultimately become better readers in English than do students taught to read only in English (Garcia, 1991; Willig, 1985; Fillmore & Valdez, 1986).

■ Research consistently supports the common sense expectation that the better students in Spanish bilingual programs

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read Spanish, the better their English will be (Garcia, 1991; Hakuta & Garcia, 1989).

■ Research by Thomas and Collier (cited in Braunger & Lewis, 1997) supports these findings. The researchers found that:

communicate to parents and children that their language and culture are valued in the school community in a variety of ways. If schools are to create environments that enable children to succeed in school and

beyond, diverse languages and ways of understanding and interpreting the world must be seen as the resource they are, not a disturbance to be eradicated. Instead, schools must acknowledge and nurture the knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse children (see Handout 14).

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Non-native speakers schooled in a second language for part or all of the day typically do reasonably well in early years; however, from fourth grade, when academic and cognitive demands of the curriculum increase rapidly, students with little or no academic and cognitive development in their first language fail to maintain positive gains.

■ Students who have spent four to seven years in a quality bilingual program sustain academic achievement and outperform single-language-schooled students in the upper grades.

Due to practical constraints, not all children can be taught in their primary language. However, teachers can commu-

### 3. A "Print-Rich" Environment

*What a child knows about print depends upon the richness of the environment and the responsiveness of the adult (Nebraska Department of Education, 1993).*

Camboune (1987) reminds us that "from the moment children are born, meaningful spoken language washes over and surrounds children. They are *immersed* in a language flood, and for most of their waking time, proficient users of the language-culture bathe them in the sounds, meanings, cadences, and rhythms of the language that they have to learn" (p. 6). In order to provide similar conditions for the printed medium, in an optimal language-

learning environment, printed materials are everywhere; it is a “print-rich” environment. On the walls, there may be charts, calendars, poems, lists, songs, graphs, and a message board (Strickland, 1990).

Learning centers, a mainstay in pre-school settings, are less utilized in primary school classrooms. However, many primary school teachers have found that learning centers—puzzles, games, listening centers, book corners, computers, writing centers, Play Doh, blocks—that appeal to children’s multiple intelligences can help children find their comfort level. In an inviting listening center, children can hear tape-recorded stories; nearby is a cozy book corner, with large cushions, a variety of books and puppets, and a flannel board to help children recall and reenact stories they have heard. These activities aid in developing comprehension, a sense of story structure, and oral language (Morrow, 1992).

The book corner should include songs and literature from a variety of cultures, lifestyles, and income groups, especially—but not limited to—those represented in the classroom. In this inviting corner, children read individually and with peers as they develop literacy skills and the enjoyment of reading. Bisset (cited in Morrow, 1990) found that children in classrooms with their own collections of literature read and looked at books 50 percent more often than children whose classrooms housed no such collections. In addition to a book corner, there should be a writing center, well stocked with a variety of writing and drawing tools and surfaces, portable chalk boards, easels, dry-erase boards, alphabet blocks, letter tiles,

an assortment of alphabet puzzles, and an alphabet pocket chart.

### **Literacy-enhanced learning centers.**

Discussed earlier in this document (see Handout 6), literacy-enhanced play centers provide additional opportunities for children to explore print in functional and meaningful ways. For example, in the housekeeping corner, teachers can put books to read to dolls and stuffed animals and materials for letters and lists; in the block corner, children can make signs and labels for their structures. If children seem to be bored with these traditional centers, teachers can plan with children to create exciting centers—farms, grocery stores, spaceships, school buses, and flower shops, to name just a few. All of the centers in the room should, in Freppon’s (1991) words, “include invitations to interact with print” (p. 192). Pickett (1998) found that the presence of an adult model with whom to interact in the enriched environment dramatically increased literacy behaviors.

Researchers have found that pretend play, in which children make up increasingly complex stories and act them out, helps children transition into storytelling, writing, and reading (see pages 23-30 in this document). Studies of the play-literacy connection have found that the social nature of play had a positive impact on measures of print knowledge, emergent storyreading, and story recall (Rowe, 1998). Dramatic play supports cognitive development by providing opportunities

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for symbolic manipulation and verbal reasoning, and social development through social interaction and opportunities for collaborative problem solving (Berk & Winsler, 1995). In sum, fantasy play contributes to social maturity and the construction of diverse

aspects of language and cognition to enhance:

- Overall intellectual performance
- The generation of creative ideas
- Memory for diverse forms of information
- Language competence, especially the capacity to reason theoretically
- The differentiation of appearance and reality
- The playful stream of verbal narrative that com-

ments on and assists us in coping with our daily life (Berk & Winsler, 1995)

#### **4. Reading Aloud, Discussing Stories, and Independent Reading**

*What students bring to class is where learning begins. It starts there and goes places (Shor, 1992).*

As stated earlier, Marilyn Adams, in *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning in Print* (1990), estimated that the typical middle-class child enters first grade with

1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture-book reading, while the corresponding child from a low-income family averages 25 such hours. Unfortunately, in many kindergartens and primary school classrooms, an emphasis on decoding increases these differences. Some researchers argue convincingly that children cannot independently comprehend unfamiliar texts without being able to decode them. Learning to decode texts, then, is logically a prerequisite to learning to read and must precede reading for enjoyment and comprehension. Based on this reasoning, many teachers view storyreading as a "frill," to be engaged in only after the real work of decoding and learning grammar and punctuation are done.

But children *can* comprehend texts that are far above their independent reading level. Listening to stories at a level that is more advanced than a child's independent reading level encourages engagement and builds listening and comprehension skills. Because of the strong correlation between storyreading and later reading achievement, it is worth reiterating the benefits of reading aloud to children. So important is reading aloud for children of all ages, that a number of researchers (Bialostok, 1992; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Cullinan, 1987) strongly recommend that even teachers in the higher grades regularly read to their classes to increase their reading vocabulary.

Researchers have found that listening to stories in the context of a pleasurable, social interaction (Chomsky, 1972; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1990; Schickedanz, 1986; Wells, 1986):

- Builds vocabulary and concept knowledge





- Aids development of sophisticated language structures
- Enhances memory, imagination, attention span, and listening skills
- Helps children think in more complex, abstract, and creative ways
- Broadens children's range of experience
- Helps children learn the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories or narrative text
- Enhances print knowledge and decoding ability
- Aids the development of phonemic awareness through rhyme and alliteration

As discussed earlier, frequent storyreading helps children make the transition from spoken to written language. Hearing stories read aloud not only increases children's knowledge of written vocabulary, but also familiarizes them with the many concepts and ways of saying found in written discourse. In his book for parents, *Raising Readers*, Bialostok (1992) discusses how written language sounds different from oral language:

I have not in recent memory started a conversation with, "Once upon a time," even though it is a familiar structure in fairy tales. If Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* was written to sound like oral language, instead of beginning with "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," it might read "I've had mixed feelings about the past several years. Part of it was okay, but part of it stunk!" (p. 29).

Learning the special features of written language through storyreading helps children use their expectations of upcoming structures and words to more accurately

and quickly process (read) ongoing text (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). This familiarity with the features of written language also appears to help children decode texts, even without explicit instruction. For example, Feitelson, Kita, and Golstein (1986) were surprised to find that children who had been read aloud to for 20 minutes each day not only outscored children in a more traditional classroom on measures of comprehension and active use of language, but also on measures of decoding. They hypothesized that at the beginning stage of reading,

better comprehension already has an impact on decoding ability. Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon remind us:

Words are surface markers and place holders for concepts, and word knowledge allows one access to the concepts of written discourse. The greater depth and breadth of one's word knowledge, the greater one's ability to comprehend the various genres of text at increasingly complex levels (1995, p. 681).

**Shared reading experience.** While there is no one right way to read a story to children, researchers have identified a number of features of effective storyreadings. Not surprisingly, these features are found in the bedtime storyreadings with





successful early readers. Don Holdaway (1979) of New Zealand introduced “shared-book experience” in order to “shift the enjoyment of a rich, open literature of favorite stories, poems, and songs right into the center of literacy instruction, and to develop teaching procedures which would make this possible” (p. 816). While there are many opportunities for children to learn vocabulary and decoding strategies from teacher models and demonstrations during a shared book experience, Holdaway stresses that the experience should be one of “shared pleasure. Like the bedtime story, the learning environment is trusting, secure, and expectant. It is free from competition, criticism, and constant correction, and sets up a natural intimacy between the teacher and children” (p. 815).

### **Big Books and predictable books.**

During shared reading, children should be exposed to a variety of texts, and the literature should be carefully chosen for its high quality of language and illustrations (Routman, 1994). Frequently Big Books are used and an experienced reader points to the text and invites children to read along. Both illustrations and predictable patterns (refrains, rhyme, rhythm, and repetition) provide scaffolds for young readers and allow children to recognize whole-language sequences. While a steady diet of predictable books is not necessary, books with predictable patterns do encourage children to predict and remember larger parts of the text. When children can chime in with “Run, run, as fast as you can” or “And Pierre said, ‘I don’t care,’” they learn to associate written words with the oral words they recite from memory.

Unlike word-for-word processing, these early recitations have the fluency of real language (Park, 1982).

Bill Martin’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear: What Did You See?* (1967) was one of the earliest predictable texts and, as Hiebert (1998) explains, it “became the prototype for the predictable text, as did his notion of ‘whole-book-success,’ that children could read the whole book successfully when the syntactic pattern was predictable, and thus grasp the power and pleasure of reading before they had acquired word recognition” (p. 5). Hiebert advises that beginning texts should have a small predictable unit that accounts for a high proportion of the text. As children’s ability to recognize words grows, the size of the predictable unit should be increased and the proportion of the text accounted for by the predictable unit decreased. Illustrations that depict concepts with which young children are highly familiar and that can be easily figured out act as scaffolds for young children’s word identification. Later, illustrations may continue to help convey events in a story episode, rather than individual words (Hiebert, 1998).

**Repeated readings.** Following storyreading, children should have opportunities to reread the books, poems, and songs independently. When enlarged texts are used, tape recordings of many selections should be available and little books of the same title should always be available (Routman, 1994). Children who have had few prior book experiences, in particular, need numerous experiences with texts to focus on critical features and to remember them (Hiebert, 1998). Repeated readings of storybooks are often not a

part of the curriculum in many traditional classrooms. However, as any parent or teacher knows, young children love to read favorite books over and over again.

As discussed earlier, Sulzby (1985) found that the familiarity that comes from repeated readings enables children to reenact stories or attempt to read stories on their own. These reenactments model the adult's storybook reading and draw their attention to print. Hiebert observes, "When the information at the word level is not yet available to children, their text expectations draw their attention to individual words and support the development of an ever-expanding reading vocabulary" (p. 3).

Morrow (1988) studied the effects on children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds of repeated readings of storybooks in school settings. These one-on-one storyreadings encouraged interaction between the teacher and child. She found that children in the repeated-book group had significantly more responses dealing with print and story structure, and more interpretative and predictive responses. Children with lower ability skills, in particular, benefited from repeated readings, making more comments and questions than those of higher ability in the repeated reading group:

Repeating books offers the child familiarity with the words, story, and illustrations. By the third reading, the children's habits of asking detail questions had changed and developed into more complex, more interpretative behavior. They began to make associations, judgments, and elaborative comments. They predicted more frequently, using prior

knowledge, and they attempted pre-reading by reciting or narrating stories from memory, or actually reading a word here and there (p. 103).

### **Importance of interaction and discussion.**

In Morrow's study, the increased responsiveness of the children was also the result of the interactive behaviors of the adults. Unlike a didactic approach, in which children are expected to recall information of a clearly specified type, an approach that emphasizes sharing ideas, experiences, and opinions helps children make personal connections with a story.

Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) identified three features of successful storybook-reading routines that resulted in significant gains by children from low-SES families. Children were given the message that they were to:

- First and foremost make sense of the story
- Learn to anticipate the author's message
- Make personal connections with the story

Similarly, Shannahan and Hogan (cited in Morrow, 1988) compared the interactive behavior of adults during storyreading with children's subsequent achievement on a test of print awareness. They found that the number of minutes spent reading per week, the number of answers to the child's questions during readings, and the number of references to the child's own experiences were the best predictors of the child's achievement on the measure used.

However, Dickinson and Smith (1994) concluded that teachers "need not feel compelled to constantly stop and discuss books at length" (p. 118). In a study that compared different styles of book reading

to preschool children, they found that for group reading, a performance-oriented style resulted in superior results on story comprehension and vocabulary development. The performance style treats the reading of books as a performance that is to be interrupted only for important matters, with discussion occurring before and after reading. In this study, although overall speech was not related to reading achievement, lower vocabulary development was associated with a didactic style, in which teachers asked children to recall specific information.



Both group reading and one-on-one storyreading lead to significant gains in comprehension, creation of original stories, language complexity, decoding, and vocabulary development (Morrow, 1992; Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). Volunteers, including older children, parents, and senior citizens, can provide many opportunities for children to hear stories in a relaxed, social, one-on-one situation in a school setting. These individualized opportunities are particularly important for children who have had few

experiences with reading stories. In group storyreading, discussion that focuses on making predictions and interpretations, rather than correct answers, can challenge and expand children's thinking and helps children feel that they are participating in classroom community.

### **Encouraging independent reading.**

Research has shown that the amount of time children spend reading is a strong predictor of children's reading achievements (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). Braunger and Lewis (1997) summarize the benefits of independent reading. Independent reading provides opportunities for children to:

- Apply reading strategies independently
- Read for a sustained period of time
- Use strategies on a variety of texts
- Solve words independently while reading texts well within their control
- Develop fluency
- Develop confidence through sustained, successful reading
- Support each other through reading

The amount of time that children choose to spend reading is enhanced by a combination of opportunities for: (a) social interaction; (b) an abundance of high-quality reading materials; (c) reading aloud to children; and (d) teacher emphasis on free reading (Morrow, 1992; Ng et al., 1996; Sweet, 1993). In addition, there are many strategies that teachers can use to encourage independent reading (see Handout 15), including:

- Independent book tubs or "browsing boxes" containing books selected to match children's reading level (as evidenced by their ability to read the words with 95 percent accuracy) help ensure successful

reading and build confidence. Books can be a combination of teacher- and child-chosen selections.

■ Having a number of choices of reading material—including children's own learning logs and journals, poems and books that have been memorized, and print-filled walls—helps children be successful with a minimum of teacher guidance.

■ Book bags (containing several books that children take home every night) encourage children to read at home and also encourage family involvement in reading.

■ Buddy reading and cooperative learning activities can enhance enjoyment and increase competence. Permission and encouragement to "ask a friend" helps make learning fun and decreases the need for teacher direction.

If teachers are to reverse the trend towards "aliteracy," children will need to form the lifelong habit of reading in the primary school years. Children need multiple opportunities to read many different kinds of texts, with varying levels of support, from reading aloud to independent reading. "What is critical," as Braunger and Lewis (1997) point out, is "that children do read—lots, for sustained periods of time, for meaning, and for real and authentic purposes" (p. 54).

### **5. Teacher Demonstrations of Skills and Strategies for Decoding**

*Comprehension is the ultimate purpose of reading (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1995).*

While the *meaning* and *content* of reading are critical to the reading and writing

process, the emergent reader also needs to be aware of the form and mechanics of reading and writing. It is clear that being aware of the separate sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and learning to match these sounds to letters (phonics) are crucial for independent reading and writing. As discussed earlier, for some children—even those who have extensive experience with storybook reading—this last step is somewhat of an "unnatural act." Yopp (1992) explains:

Performing phonemic awareness tasks is not easy. The tasks require that children treat speech as an object and that they shift their attention away from the content of speech to the form of speech. Phonemic awareness tasks demand that children analyze or manipulate the units of speech rather than focus on meaning.

Philip Gough of the University of Texas (1997), agrees:

The child's awareness that a word is composed of phonemes is typically not there. If you take the average four-year-old and say what's the first sound in "fish," they say, "Fish don't make sounds." That is, what they're obsessed with is the meaning of words. And what we have to do in kindergarten or the first grade is draw their attention to the sounds and words which they have been looking right through to the meaning.

How teachers help children accomplish this task may have profound effects on children's ability and motivation to read and write. They must help children main-

tain and strengthen their focus on the whole of language—the meaning—while they draw their attention to the parts of language—the letters and words. Without this dual focus, children may learn to, in Healy's (1990) words, "bark at print," but at the expense of comprehension, verbal reasoning, and motivation to read and write. Children who have had few experiences with stories are particularly at risk

In particular, children who are unable to hear the separate sounds in words may be seen by their teachers as "reading disabled." In turn, these early labels may lead to low expectations that become internalized by the child. Fortunately, just as emergent literacy has informed our understanding of how children learn to make sense of print, we also know a great deal about the process of learning to decode the printed word. When children lack phonemic awareness, teachers can provide many enjoyable activities that promote the development of this important competency. We have seen that children develop phonemic awareness from the oral and written language they are exposed to during their preschool and primary-school years. In particular, books and songs with rhymes and alliteration and language play, such as tongue-twisters and pig Latin, help children learn to hear the separate sounds in words. In addition, phonemic awareness is promoted by encouraging the use of developmental spelling, and by drawing children's attention to letter/sound patterns in familiar words.

In summary, children develop both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge from:

- Rereading favorite storybooks, particularly books with rhymes and alliteration
- Using predictable texts to scaffold their reading
- Reading familiar signs in the environment
- Seeing adults write, paying attention as adults draw attention to letter/sound patterns in familiar words
- Using invented spelling to write their names, stories, and messages

for losing track of the fact that reading is supposed to make sense. Phonics may even become a gatekeeper, holding children back from reading whole texts (Weaver et al., 1996).





**Onset, rime, and analogy.** While there is much debate regarding the optimal mix of practices that lead to efficient decoding, there is considerable agreement on the goal of phonics instruction: Children should learn to read many words automatically and fluently. Following are some of the insights we have gained into how children acquire phonics knowledge (see Handout 16). Of course, not all children learn in the same ways. As in all good teaching, individualized instruction based on careful assessment is crucial.

■ Most young children have difficulty analyzing words into separate sounds, for example, separating “cat” into its three letters and corresponding sounds. This is because phonemes are not discrete units. The attributes of a phoneme spill over into those that come before it and follow it in a word (Adams, 1990; Gunning, 1995; Treiman, 1985).

■ Children become sensitive to rhyme at an early age. Bryant et al. (1989) showed that nursery rhyme knowledge at three years was related to reading ability at six years even after differences in social background and IQ were taken into account.

■ Goswami and Bryant (1990) suggested that the linguistic units *onset* and *rime* may be crucial in explaining the robust link between rhyming and reading. *Onset* is the initial consonant or consonant clusters, and *rime* is the vowel of a syllable plus any consonants that might follow. For example, in the word “cat,” *c* is the onset and *at* is the rime; in the word “splat,” *spl* is the onset and *at* is the rime.

■ Wise, Olson, and Treiman (1990) found that first-grade readers who learned to read words by segmenting them into onset and rime subunits remembered how to

read the words better than readers who segmented the words into other units.

■ Children who recognize onsets and rimes can learn to make *analogies* between spelling patterns in words to help them read new words. For example, a child who can read *table* can more easily learn to read *stable*, *cable*, *gable*, and *fable*. Adams (1990) concluded that an analogy approach is not only a strategy used by skilled readers, but also an effective method for teaching students to decode.

■ Several studies (Goswami 1986, 1990; Treiman, 1985) found that reading words by

analogy develops earlier than reading words by sequential (letter by letter) decoding.

■ The more print words children recognize, the better children are able to make analogies between letter strings representing onsets and rimes (Ehri & Robbins, 1992).

■ The ability to make analogies (e.g., from *cat* to *mat*, *smile* to *vile*, *table* to *stable*, *beak* to *peak*) eliminates the need for the child to blend phonemes in the rimes of new words because the blended rimes are supplied by the reader’s memory for the known words. Because blending is known to be a difficult operation, this ability leads to more efficient word recognition (Ehri & Robbins, 1992).

Based on these findings, focusing on onsets and rimes can help children develop phonemic awareness and learn to make analogies between spelling patterns in words to help them read new words. At the same time, in order to divide words into onsets and rimes, children are learning to understand how letters symbolize

**CHILDREN WHO HAVE HAD FEW EXPERIENCES WITH STORIES** are particularly at risk for losing track of the fact that reading is supposed to make sense.



sounds and how to blend parts of known words with parts of new words (Ehri & Robbins, 1992). For example, a child who can read *cat*, can more easily learn to read *bat*, *sat*, *mat*, *pat*, and *that*.

If this sounds a lot like a Dr. Seuss story, it is not a coincidence. Reading books that emphasize sounds, such as nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books, has provided a scaffold for many children to “teach themselves to read.” Rather than needing phonics knowledge in order to begin to read texts, there is a great deal of evidence that there is a reciprocal relationship between reading, writing, word play, and phonics knowledge; that is, each one facilitates and reinforces the other (Perfetti, Beck, Bell, & Hughes, 1987; Weaver et al., 1996).

Instead of memorizing lists of words, a task that can be daunting for young children, children can develop a core group of high-frequency words through reading

**IF THIS SOUNDS A LOT LIKE A DR. SEUSS STORY, IT IS NOT A COINCIDENCE.** Reading books that emphasize sounds, such as nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books, has provided a scaffold for many children to teach themselves to read.

predictable texts. Wylie and Durrell’s research (cited in Hiebert, 1998) found that 37 times account for 500 words that occur in primary-level text,

though their frequencies varied. Martin and Hiebert (1997) demonstrated that “initially struggling readers who became successful readers during first grade knew few words by mid-year, but once they had acquired a core group of high-frequency words, they progressed rapidly in their word recognition skills.”

An example by Gaskins, Gaskins, and Gaskins (1991) shows one way that chil-

dren can be helped to accomplish this task. The researchers used an explicit instruction program to teach children to use analogies to decode words. Calling their method “compare/contrast,” children are taught through modeling, guided practice, and teacher feedback. Children are told what they will be taught, why it is important, when it can be used, and how to use it. The authors describe Tom, a non-reader in the second grade, who had poor receptive and expressive language skills, and who had participated in the program for several months. While reading a predictable book, he came upon a word he did not know how to pronounce. To the “teacher’s amazement,” he declared:

“I know the pair/trast strategy. I know table; this is stable!” This was the first time that Tom had used the compare/contrast strategy independently, and it was truly a breakthrough for him as a reader. He now had a way to decode unknown words. Tom himself seemed to realize the value of the strategy, for he promptly used it again in the second sentence to figure out *sty*. He said, “I know cry, so this is sty” (p. 221).

**Metacognition and the effective use of strategies.** Children who have a range of flexible strategies to use when they are stuck on a word are able to take an active approach to solving problems encountered in the reading process. When learning is viewed as understanding, an important element of a reading program is to help children become aware of how they go about their thinking and learning (metacognition). Key to a metacognitive

approach is the flexible use of strategies. Speigel (1995) explains:

Skills are used in a reflexive manner whereas strategy usage involves conscious selection of an approach to solve a problem. Effective strategy utilization is metacognitive. The learner knows a problem exists, identifies the problem, and puts into effect a fix-up strategy to bypass or solve the problem.

Learning to read, Weaver and colleagues (1996) point out, "involves developing strategies for making sense of text." Teachers can model strategies by thinking out loud, which in turn helps children to internalize these mental models. A kindergarten teacher reported that she saw a big change in children's ability to write when she began to use this strategy: "It is not all right for me as a teacher to write without talking. Children need to see me thinking through the process. I model my thinking, and I see them learning to think about letters and sounds" (Freppon & Dahl, 1991). In addition to teaching children to use analogies based on onset and rime, a number of strategies are recommended by reading specialists:

- Look at the picture and the first letter of the word
- Look for a known chunk or small word (e.g., *child* in *children*)
- Read the word using only the beginning and ending sounds
- Think of a word that looks like the difficult word
- Find the small word in the big word (e.g., *bathroom*)
- Find the ending or beginning of a word in the main word (e.g., *playing*, *repay*)

■ Skip the word and read to the end of the sentence

■ Substitute a word that makes sense—Think about the story, does the word you are using make sense? Does it look right, does it sound right?

■ Link to prior knowledge

■ Predict and anticipate what could come next

■ Read the passage several times for fluency and meaning

■ Write words you can't figure out and need to know on Post-it notes

■ Go back to the beginning of the sentence and try again

■ Read the word without the vowels

It is important to reiterate that these are strategies that are used by *beginning* readers. Although proficient readers may use only a few of these strategies during reading, these strategies play an important role in helping young children learn to decode words fluently and automatically. While traditional approaches to phonics instruction require children to decode every word with a letter-by-letter method, research (discussed previously) shows that adults as well as children tend to read unfamiliar

words in pronounceable chunks, not letter by letter. Weaver (1997) points out that when the emphasis is on

decoding every word, "Many children just never become genuine readers. They give up, even if we don't give up on them. And we often do."

**CHILDREN WHO HAVE A RANGE OF FLEXIBLE STRATEGIES TO USE** when they are stuck on a word are able to take an active approach to solving problems encountered in the reading process.

**Decodable texts.** Although approximately 80 percent of children learn to read with minimal difficulty, about 20 percent need more intensive explicit instruction (Weaver, 1997). Some researchers suggest that struggling readers should learn to read with phonetically regular texts (decodable texts) that highlight a particular feature of a word (e.g., "Dad had a bad fan") should be used for early readers. However, decodable texts are often very difficult to read because, as Sampson (1997) points out, "they

leave only one strategy for the reader (decoding by sound/symbol). When that fails, the reader has nothing to fall back upon." For example, a child would be able to make little sense of this passage from a decodable text: "A seed is in the sea. The seed and the sea play. The sea can plant the seed." Weaver (1997) provides this example of an 11-year-old child attempting to read a decodable text: "Gail and Ben cannot go home. The light is wide. I can mim bake a boat said Ben. You the Gail said Gail. The Gail is big is Ben. Pete/boat/not make a pail boat. Ben they said boat boat said Gail."

Clearly, this child did not even expect this text to make sense. When children must read texts that sacrifice meaning for phonetic regularity, they may not only become bored and frustrated, but also fail to learn that reading can be a meaningful, enjoyable activity. While literary merit should not be the only criteria for text selection, most researchers agree that texts should fit the expectations of readers regarding stories and that they should make sense. Research suggests that American students' problems in learning to read are due to a lack of automaticity, not a lack of fundamental skills. To apply knowledge automatically requires experience with numerous texts (Hiebert, 1998). Poor readers, in particular, need to be taught a range of flexible strategies and have access to numerous texts that scaffold their reading. It may take children with few prior experiences numerous experiences with texts to focus on critical features and remember them (Hiebert, 1998).

**Children identified with reading problems.** Research has shown that pro-



grams that identify at-risk children in the first grade and begin intervention before a history of failure has set in can provide children with the experiences they need to be successful at school. Effects of programs for students who begin after first grade are much less significant (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1993; Spiegel, 1995). The report by the National Reading Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) concluded that:

There is little evidence that children experiencing difficulties learning to read, even those with identifiable learning disabilities, need radically different sorts of supports than children at low risk, although they may need more intensive support. Childhood environments that support early literacy development and excellent instruction are important for all children. Excellent instruction is the best intervention for children who demonstrate problems learning to read.

In their review of intervention programs, Slavin and his colleagues (1993) identified a strategy that stands out from all others in effectiveness: one-on-one tutoring beginning in the first grade for children identified with reading problems.

Although all forms of individualized tutoring were more effective than any other reading strategy, tutoring by certified teachers was the most beneficial.

Juel (1996) explored factors that may account for successful tutoring outcomes in one-on-one tutoring situations. In her study, she paired university students who were poor readers with struggling first-grade readers. She found that "words matter" and that four types of activities and interactions were particularly important:

- Reading text that gradually and repetitively introduced both high-frequency vocabulary and words with common spelling patterns



- Receiving direct instruction about the letter/sound relationships with words

- Being helped to identify and spell words through numerous interactions scaffolded by a tutor

- Hearing the tutor's words as that tutor modeled how to identify or spell unknown words

**Summary of strategies to facilitate decoding.** There are a number of ways that teachers can directly help children develop phonics knowledge that they can

### **DURING THE EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS,**

children need many experiences with oral and written language to build a strong foundation for thinking, imagining, interpreting, synthesizing, and creating.

use in reading and writing. Weaver et al. (1996) offer these suggestions (see Handout 17). Many of these suggestions

have been discussed earlier; they are presented here to serve as a summary:

- Read and reread favorite nursery rhymes to reinforce the sound patterns of the language, and enjoy tongue-twisters and other forms of language play together.

- Read aloud to children from Big Books or charts large enough for all children in the group or class to see the print easily. Run a pointer or your hand or finger under the words to help children make the association between spoken words and written words.

- Part of the time, choose Big Books and/or make charts of stories, poems, and rhymes that make interesting use of alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia.

- When sharing Big Books or charts, focus children's attention on the beginnings and ends of words. It is helpful to focus on elements that alliterate and rhyme before focusing on individual sounds.

- The most effective and efficient phonics instruction focuses children's attention on noticing onsets and rimes. During the discussion of onsets and rimes, you and the children can make charts of words with the same sound pattern (to help children use analogies to read new words).

- Read alphabet books with children, and make alphabet books together.

- Read with children other books that emphasize sound—books such as *Noisy Poems*, edited by Jill Bennett; *Deep Down Underground*, by Oliver Dunrea; and Dr. Seuss books. Comment on sounds.

- When reading together, help children use prior knowledge and context plus initial consonants to predict what a word will be; then look at the rest of the word to confirm or correct.

- Talk about letters and sounds as you write messages to children and as you help them compose something together or individually. This is a very important way of helping children begin to hear individual sounds in words as well as learn to spell some of the words they write.

- Help children notice print in their environment—signs, labels, and other print.

- When children demonstrate in their attempts at writing that they realize letters represent sounds, help them individually to write the sounds they hear in words.

- Provide tape recordings of many reading selections for children to listen to as they follow along with the written text. It helps to provide small copies of the text, not just a Big Book or chart.

It is important to remember that phonics, as Routman (1994) reminds us, is not an end in itself; it is a necessary but insufficient condition for learning to read (Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Stanovich, 1986). Increases in vocabulary growth and concept knowledge are strongly correlated with reading and being read to; therefore, concentration on isolated skills (for later assembly into the whole) may increase the risk of reading failure. When children spend large amounts of time



learning isolated skills, such as decoding, they may initially score well on standardized tests that measure these skills. However, after grade three there is no longer a strong relationship between phonics knowledge (alone) and reading proficiency (Chall, 1983). After that time, comprehension increasingly depends on vocabulary, concept knowledge, and verbal reasoning.

Healy (1990) observes that "coming to grips with verbal logic, wrestling one's mind into submission to an author's unfamiliar point of view, and struggling to make connections appear to be particularly taxing to today's young intellects" (p. 25). During the early elementary school years, children need many experiences with oral and written language to build a strong foundation for thinking, imagining, interpreting, synthesizing, and creating. Gaining phonics knowledge in the context of meaningful reading, writing, and word play activities helps children use this knowledge to read fluently and automatically.

## 6. Dictating and Acting Out Stories

*Stories that are not acted out are fleeting dreams; private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. If in the press of a busy day, I am tempted to shorten the process by only reading the stories aloud and skipping the dramatizations, the children object. They say, "But we haven't done the story yet" (Paley, 1990, p. 25).*

Just as reading a story requires the reader to *enter* an imaginary world, writing a story requires the writer to *create* an imaginary world. For young children, writing is

often an arduous task. A young writer must be able to physically manipulate a pencil and reproduce print from memory in order to say what he or she has to say (Cooper, 1993). Although learning to write independently is an important goal in the primary years, dictating stories eliminates the necessity to learn everything at once; children's emerging narrative voice can be temporarily freed from the constraints of the mechanics of writing. Teachers act as scribes, writing children's words as they



dictate them, listening carefully for the narrative thread, and helping children clarify their thoughts. As these stories are reread by the author and his or her classmates, children begin to match the remembered words with the printed ones.

Storytelling is an important first step toward becoming a writer and is a strong predictor of literacy (Engel, 1996/97). Children who may feel uncomfortable with the written word may be quite adept at



storytelling. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (1997), "The comfort zone of the oral tale can be the path by which they reach the written one." Children's storytelling can be enriched by stories of all kinds—poetry, songs, trade books, Big Books, fairy tales, children's own dramatic play, and reading each others' stories. Engel observes, "The richer the repertoire of storytelling styles a child is exposed to, the more possibilities for that child to develop his or her own powerful narrative voice, one that reflects both his community, his family, and his inner life" (1996/97, p. 9).

#### **How to get started with dictation.**

Story starters, such as asking for a dream or an adventure, using a picture (one that

the child draws or paints or a photograph or painting), or merely prompting with "once upon a time," can help

children get started. Dramatic play offers an especially rich source of stories that can be incorporated into storytelling activities, particularly group storytelling (Soundy & Genisio, 1994). When teachers observe children's play, they can record interesting and entertaining incidents to use during storytelling. For example, in a group setting, teachers can remind children of a previously observed dramatization of a picnic, a voyage to outer space, or a monster's invasion of the school. Props such as puppets, flannel boards, and music help spur children's imagination; pillows and mats can add to the relaxed, collaborative atmosphere that

encourages genuine sharing (Soundy & Genisio, 1994).

**Acting out stories.** Teachers can strengthen the dramatic play/storytelling connection by encouraging children to act out their own dictated stories and the stories they hear in the classroom (see pages 24-30 in this document). Glazer (1989) suggests the use of paper-bag prop stories to stimulate acting out stories:

Put a book familiar to the children in each of three to five different paper bags. Fasten the book jacket or a photocopy of one picture from the book onto the front of the bag. Put props associated with each story into the appropriate bag. Props should represent story objects, settings, characters, sequence, and other elements important for the child's role playing (p. 23).

Both spontaneous story acting and teacher-guided story acting (see Handout 8) help children connect literacy with play. Acting out stories, both child- and adult-authored:

- Brings stories to life—enhancing story recall, imagination, and emergent storyreading
- Encourages the creative use of language
- Gives children the opportunity to sort out problems and concerns
- Helps children make the transition from oral to written language

Teachers who have encouraged these activities are enthusiastic about both the process and the learning outcomes for children (see Handout 6). Tom Drummond, instructor at North Seattle Community College, writes:

**JUST AS READING A STORY  
REQUIRES THE READER TO  
ENTER AN IMAGINARY  
WORLD, writing a story  
requires the writer to create  
an imaginary world.**

I wholeheartedly recommend that every early childhood program do this regularly with children. It is an almost guaranteed way to elicit from children their natural interest in learning to write narrative stories, illustrate them with drawings, dramatize them in collaboration with others, and read them to anyone who will listen.

### **7. Opportunities to Write, with Various Levels of Support**

*The written language puzzle is a complex one. And as, with most puzzles, children cannot solve it by being given only one piece at a time (Dyson, 1982).*

Just as research on emergent literacy has focused our attention on the interrelatedness of oral and written language, this same research has demonstrated the strong relationship between reading and writing. Like talking and listening, reading and writing are inseparable processes, each one informing and transforming the other (Learning Media, 1992; Sweet, 1993). Holdaway (cited in Learning Media, 1992) comments:

Instruction has persistently separated reading from writing in a way that would be insufferable in learning to listen and talk. The two modes form an integral nexus of learning around common processes, and this, too, may be readily reflected in teaching. There are no logical or practical excuses for the dismemberment of literacy—only instructional precedents (p. 10).

Research shows that when reading and writing are taught together, the benefits are greater than when they are taught separately. When children write words, they attend to the details of those words. In this way, writing leads to improved phonemic awareness and word recognition, which in turn lead to improved reading. When children read, they attend to the linguistic features, vocabulary, and structures of written language that they learn to incorporate into their writing. Bearse (1992) found that in her study in which third-grade children read and discussed fairy tales, then wrote their own fairy tales, the children internalized the cadences, rhythms, and particular phrases characteristic of fairy tales. They also borrowed from the stories they read, sometimes unconsciously blending several stories into their own.

An example from a Northwest classroom that had been studying fables illustrates how children incorporate the

language patterns of literature into their own stories. The children in this classroom were encouraged to use developmental spelling in first drafts and in their journals:

Chapter 1: Why do dogs chas CATS?

Once apan a time in a far away land thar was a yung cat and Tow kitins. One day a dog came. But in this land dogs don't chas cats thaey like cats. And the dog saw the kitins and wanted to play with them so he askt the yung cat. And He said NO! so the dog got mad and focht. So for

**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT WHEN READING AND WRITING ARE TAUGHT together, the benefits are greater than when they are taught separately.**

now on thay set a egsampel for  
ether dogs.

**Beginnings.** But long before children can express their thoughts with such sophistication, children are, in Durkin's words, "paper and pencil kinds—they scribble,



copy letters of the alphabet, and write the names of friends and family members (cited in Dyson, 1982). Stine (1980) found that among preschoolers, writing was the most popular beginning reading activity. In these first attempts at writing, children explore how written language works—"how meaning is conveyed through, and retrieved from, print" (Dyson, 1982). Young children often mix drawing and writing; they may assign meaning after writing, and they may express surprise that what they have written is not what they intended. Dyson (1982) provides these two examples of conversations with two five-year-old children who have just written a string of letters:

"Is this a word, Mom?" asked five-year-old Chad.

"No, that's not a word, Chad."

"Well, when's it-gonna be a word, Mom? And another thing, if it's a bad word, are you gonna get mad at me?"

Sance: Guess what this spells?

*(Sance has written Loeed).*

Dyson: What does it spell?

Sance: You gotta' guess it.

Dyson: Okay. Lo-eed.

Sance: Huh?

Dyson: Loeed.

Sance: *(with surprise)* That's not my dog's name.

Clearly, at this point, both Sance and Chad have a great deal of work to do before they have a working understanding of the relationship between spoken and printed words. How do Sance and Chad become the second- or third-graders who solve age-old problems regarding animal behavior, create their own poems and fairy tales, and write letters to pen pals? The answer, based on research in literature-based classrooms, is the opportunity to engage in many meaningful reading and writing activities (Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). While traditional writing lessons have focused on neatness and correct spelling and letter formation, research on emergent literacy has drawn our attention to the paramount importance of meaning and purpose in the process of learning to write.

Through writing, children gain understanding of the written language system, of the relationship between print and oral language. As the two previous examples illustrate, young children's understandings of our language system are often very different from adult perspectives. Griffith and Leavell (1995-96) observe:

Children's initial explorations with written language will lead them to understand that a written word has

characteristics separate from the characteristics of the “thing” it represents. One six-year-old was astonished that the letters “o” and “x” were read as “ox” because, as he explained, “That word isn’t big enough to be ox.” The child had not yet grasped the symbol system of written English (p. 85)

The use of developmental spelling (see pages 21-22 in this document) helps children solve the puzzle of how print maps onto sound. In addition, in their early attempts at writing, children learn to detect similarities and differences between the ways that various sounds are produced, and spelling, rather than random letters, becomes phonetic (Gough, 1997; Schickedanz, 1986). When children are able to express their thoughts while using their best phonetic spelling, they can focus on using language to communicate. Because thinking is, of course, crucial to good writing, both writing and thinking benefit when young children are encouraged to concentrate on the content of writing rather than the form or mechanics of writing (Sweet, 1993). In *Dancing with the Pen* (1992), the authors explain: “Allowing children to attempt spelling enables them to use vocabulary from their oral language which then flows on into their writing. Spelling is functional—it enables writers to express meaning. It is therefore, a tool for writing, not a barrier to the writing process” (Ministry of Education, p. 59).

Teachers can encourage young children to move to standard spelling by modeling writing and providing an environment rich in opportunities to explore purposeful and

meaningful print. Walls filled with print—charts, posters, children’s work, poems and songs on chart pack, and word cards with frequently used words—provide many ways for children to learn the standard spelling of a word. Dictionaries of various sizes and degrees of complexity and “banks” of juicy words (adjectives and verbs) help children to be confident and independent writers. In this way, children learn spelling in the context of writing.

Teachers can also target words from children’s draft writing for additional practice; targeted words should be those that chil-

dren consistently spell almost correctly. However, even intermediate-age children often use invented spelling in a first draft, using standard spelling when their writing is for others.

**IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY YEARS,** it is the child’s narrative voice that must find its way into the classroom.

**“Writing floats on a sea of talk.”** In the early elementary years, it is the child’s narrative voice that must find its way into the classroom. Vickie Spandel (1996) describes voice as the “writer coming through the writing. It is the heart and soul of writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath .... At the primary level, voice is first noticeable in speaking, oral storytelling, and art” (pp. 11-15). By building on these competencies, teachers can help children develop their writing voice as well. “Writing floats on a sea of talk,” reminds Britton (1970). By talking to each other about their work, bouncing ideas off each other, and helping each other solve problems, children learn to consider the needs of their audience, to think critically, and to connect their con-

cerns with academic learning (Dyson, 1987). Dyson found that in her studies of young children's collaborative story writing, "the most elaborate verbal stories and the most flexible manipulation of narrative time and space occurred, not in the texts themselves, but in the children's talk" (1987, p. 415).

**What to write.** Opportunities to write are limited only by the imaginations of children and teachers. Children can write individually and in groups; they can write in functional ways by making lists, charts, labels, and calendars, and using sign-in sheets.

They can write creatively by writing:

- Stories for publishing
- Letters
- Wall stories (in which children retell an adult story or create a new story and illustrate it on large paper)
- Big Books (an original narrative, or based on an adult-written book)
- Poetry, newspapers, and stories for friends and family
- In journals—about daily experiences, an adventure, a dream, a fantasy, a feeling, or to solve a problem
- Throughout the day in literacy-enhanced learning centers
- In response to art or to stories read or listened to
- For research projects

While some topics can be teacher-directed, choice is an important part of writing. In *Dancing with the Pen* (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 27), the authors suggest that when learners choose topics successfully, they will:

- Value firsthand experience and their own knowledge
- Make use of their surroundings, both inside and outside school

- Discuss their ideas freely
- Research their ideas in a variety of ways
- Adapt and make use of their own and others' material and suggestions
- Show initiative in selecting their own topics for writing
- Feel confident enough to muse on selecting a topic

By modeling writing and thinking out loud while doing so, teachers can help children learn to think about not only letters and sounds but also how writers go about the task of thinking of what to say and how to say it.

**Supporting the writing effort.** Young children exhibit a wide range of proficiency in writing in the same ways they do with reading. While some kindergarten children's writing may consist primarily of drawing intermixed with a few letters, others may be writing full paragraphs. But all children can be successful when goals are individualized and when their efforts are supported. Teachers can support children's writing in a number of ways. Teachers who model thinking and writing can help children learn to think about letters and sounds and to see how writers go about the task of thinking of what to say and how to say it (Freppon & Dahl, 1991).

Before children can write independently, they need a variety of demonstrations, as well as many opportunities to write with varying levels of support. In *Guided Reading, Good First Teaching for All Children*, Fountas & Pinnell (1996) describe four levels of support for writing:

- In shared writing, the teacher acts as a scribe while children dictate stories,



although children may also do some of the writing.

■ In interactive writing, all children participate in composing a large-print piece, which can be a list, a chart, pages of a book, or another form of writing. Teachers provide a high level of support with models and demonstrations, but individual children are involved in the writing.

■ In guided writing or writing workshop, mini-lessons are provided on a variety of aspects of writing in group and individual settings. Individual conferences provide selected feedback.

■ In independent writing, children use each other and the room as resources, with little teacher guidance.

**The writing process.** While extensive revision of written work can be a laborious task for young children, children of all ages can be encouraged to publish some of their work. New Zealand educators have noted that "where publication has not been part of the writing program, or has been treated in a casual manner, there has been a general lack of interest in writing" (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 72). At Cherry Valley Elementary School in Polson, Montana, the writing process is described as a recursive process that starts with sharing and enjoying, and progresses through a flexible process that includes: the idea, a draft, editing, a closer look, publishing, and sharing and enjoying (see pages 124-126 in this document).

Sharing and enjoying are critical aspects of writing. When children read and write their own stories and read those of other children, they share ideas and opinions and extend each others stories (Dyson,

1987). In the process, they not only gain a sense of themselves as writers, but their reading comprehension is also enhanced. Several studies have found that children comprehend and make inferences better when reading child-authored texts than when reading textbooks (Sampson, 1997). Daiute (1985, cited in Cummins, 1986) observes:

Children who learn early that writing is not simply an exercise gain a sense of power that gives them confidence to write—and write a lot ....





Beginning writers who are confident that they have something to say or that they can find out what they need to know overcome some limits of training or development. Writers who don't feel that what they say matters have an additional burden that no skills training can help them overcome (pp. 5-6).

By validating children's oral storytelling, art, and writing—and helping children connect writing with their prior knowledge and experience—teachers can help each child develop his or her own narrative voice.

### **8. Using Projects to Integrate Literacy into All Aspects of the Classroom, Including Art and Music**

*We cannot know through language what we cannot imagine. The image—visual, tactile, auditory—plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning through text. Those who cannot imagine cannot read (Eisner, 1992, p. 125).*

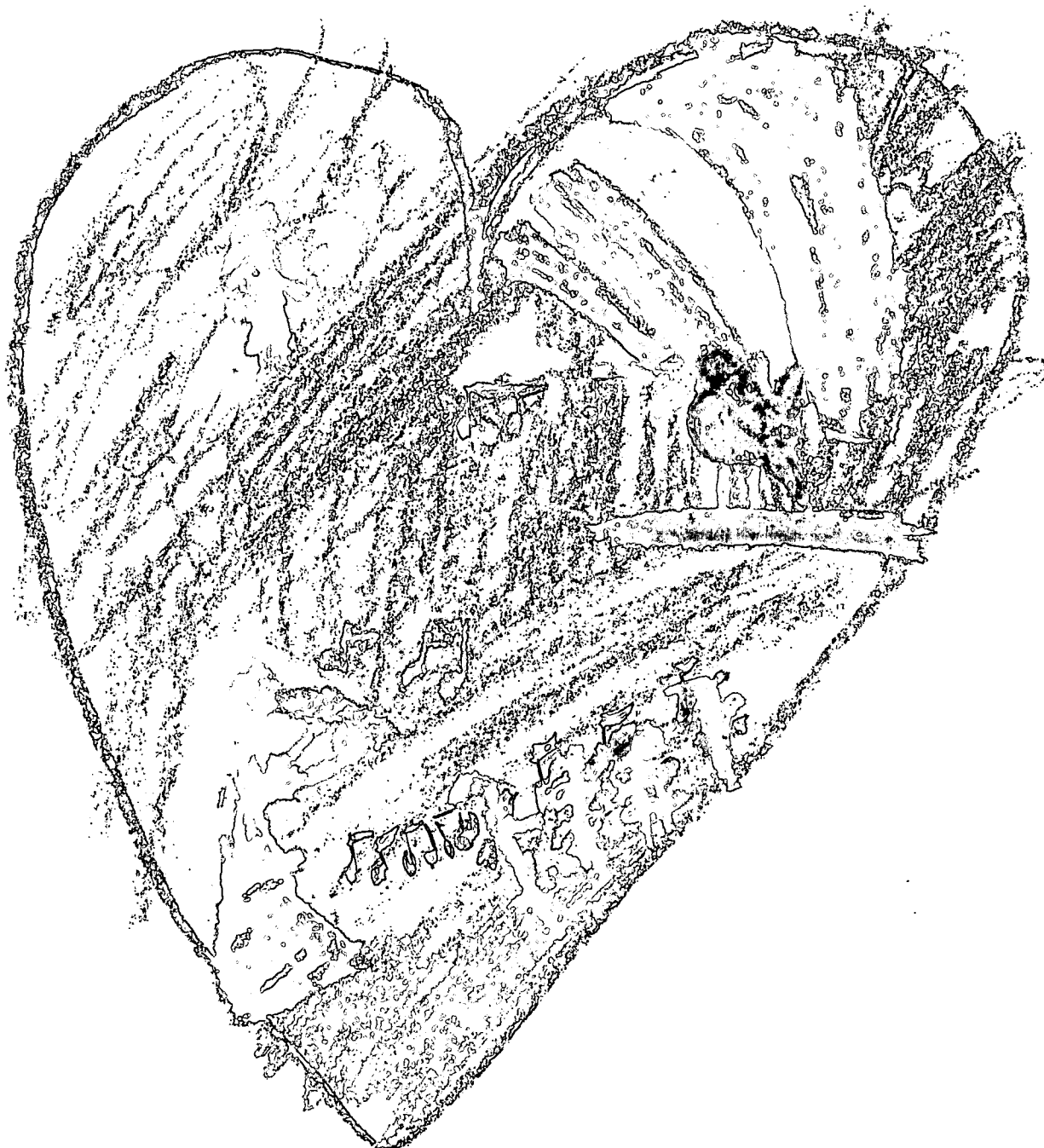
Eleanor Duckworth has said that the development of intelligence is "a matter of having wonderful ideas and feeling confident enough to try them out" (1972, p. 227). Proponents of an integrated curriculum strive to create such a classroom environment by encouraging active, engaged learning through open-ended discussion and multiple modes of inquiry. Brain research demonstrates that the mind is designed to perceive patterns and relationships, and works best when learning takes place in the context of meaningful

activities. Teachers who integrate curricular approaches encourage children to bring all of their intelligences and experiences to the learning activity.

Although verbal/linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence have dominated the traditional pedagogy of western societies, Howard Gardner of Harvard University suggests that there are at least seven human intelligences. In addition to logical/mathematical and verbal intelligence, he includes: spatial, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Proponents of an educational approach that encourages the development of multiple intelligences argue that when students are able to specialize and excel in at least one area, discipline problems are reduced and academic and cooperative learning skills improve. Because each child learns the subject matter in a variety of different ways, chances of understanding and retaining the information are multiplied (Campbell, 1995).

**Linking literature with art.** For children who have trouble engaging with a text, linking art and literacy is critical. True engagement involves the ability to enter into the world of the story—to imagine a setting, to interpret a plot, to build relationships with characters, to visualize or "see" what is being read. Readers who cannot visualize their reading are unlikely to want to read (Eisner, 1992; Enciso, 1992; Wilhelm, 1995). One frustrated young reader, when asked his thoughts on a reading assignment, exploded: "I can't think about it, talk about it, do anything about it, if I can't see it!" (Wilhelm, 1995, p. 476). Asking children to create visual art as a response to reading

Music  
the sound of dancing silver bells  
the sound of flutes playing soft full of color and joy  
the sound of fairies dancing across the sky  
the sound of birds songs  
joyful beautiful  
Kate



and to write stories as a response to visual art helps children build rich mental models as they learn to read and write.

Looking at, talking about, and reflecting on visual artwork helps children develop aesthetic sensitivity. They learn that art consists of symbols that communicate

**TRUE ENGAGEMENT INVOLVES THE ABILITY TO ENTER INTO THE WORLD OF THE STORY—to imagine a setting, to interpret a plot, to build relationships with characters, to visualize or “see” what is being read.**

ideas, experiences, and feelings that can be shared (Honigman & Bhavnagri, 1998). In a thematic study of reading and great artists, children

in second-grade teacher Jane Kolakowski's class listen to and read stories about artists' lives and work. In their projects, children develop and refine the visual senses and extend their understanding of story elements by first discussing and exploring paintings, and then imagining that they can enter a painting. One seven-year-old wrote (using developmental spelling) the following in response to the painting *Stafford Heights* by Garl Melchers:

I smell grain in the field. not that many houses are around. There are many trees. It is sunny and there is a dirt path. There's a field on a hill. It is bright outside the air is sweet the trees smell lik pinecones. There are no flowers here. My mouth waters when I tast sweet graps. You can not hear the birds singging. You can feel a breeze. You can't see anyone outside. The wind plays tug-of war with my hair (Kolakowski, 1995, p. 28).

Kolakowski comments that the insight and maturity expressed in the metaphor

of the last sentence is brought out by the child's interaction with art:

The study verifies for me the research of Elliot Eisner (1992) in which he writes that the arts' contribution is its offer to everyone of an ability to feel and participate in the lives of others. Art is communication with oneself and others. Art unites the rational and the emotional .... I want my students to feel, to dream, and to know that they have something to share with the world. This is the process that art study begins (p. 35).

**“Poetry is like directions for your imagination.”** While poetry is often used to teach new words and to promote phonemic awareness, few primary classrooms provide opportunities for children to study poetry in its own right (Denman, 1988; Duthie & Zimet, 1992). However, children's natural ability to attune to rhyming patterns, cadences, sounds, and metaphorical imagery can be enhanced by early experiences with reading and writing poetry. After completing a successful unit on poetry, first-grade teachers Duthie and Zimet (1992), concluded that, “It is a genre that is not only accessible to primary children, but can be the genre that excites children and motivates them to read and write” (p. 14). “Poetry,” one child concluded, “is like directions for your imagination.”

Utilizing the expertise of local writers can help both teachers and children get started. NWREL editor/writer Tony Kneidek has found that young children—even those who have had little experience with poetry—respond enthusiastically to an

Bells, sticks, roses, tulips  
 Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, cocoa  
 Makes me feel like the garden angel of all children and their  
 mothers  
 All the children depend on me  
 Zoe



approach that includes reading, discussing, writing, and illustrating poems. In his workshops, he often begins by talking about his own interest in poetry and learning about the interests and experiences of the children. After reading and discussing several poems written by poets as diverse in their style and content as Maya Angelou, Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, and Countee Cullen, he then introduces a prop to help children brainstorm (as a group) a number of descriptive words that they then incorporate into individually written poems.

In a recent poetry workshop with first- and second-graders, children generated an imaginative list of words to describe the taste, feel, smell, sounds, and sights of wind chimes. The children's words were transcribed in large letters to a chart pack. Then the children selected and arranged the words into whatever form and order they wanted to create their own poems. "The beauty of the exercise," Kneidek says, "is that there is no way they can do anything wrong, and they know this." While many of the words used in the poems are the same, the children's writing reflects their own feelings, thoughts, and imagination.

**The project approach and the inquiry model.** The project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989) and the inquiry model (Wills, 1995), like more traditional thematic units, provide opportunities for children to learn about a topic. However, unlike thematic units, which usually consist of preplanned lessons, teachers using a project or inquiry approach "plan for possibilities." Depth of understanding, rather than seeking correct answers to questions posed by the teacher, is the

goal of a research project. Copenhaver (1997) points out, "Two people cannot have a dialogue with each other if one of them is asking the questions. Yet the mandated curriculum is loaded with someone else's voice asking all of the questions and demanding all of the answers" (p. 1).

In the inquiry model of learning, the teacher's role moves from interrogator to a collaborator in joint inquiry. The ability to ask meaningful questions and formulate alternative solutions is critical to the higher-order literacy demanded by today's society. Healy (1990) comments, "In order to analyze problems and evaluate alternatives, children need active practice asking and attempting to answer their own questions. Too much teacher talk gets in the way of such higher-level reasoning because it prevents children from doing their own thinking!" (p. 96).

Rather than standardized, predetermined outcomes, the goal of an integrated curriculum that emphasizes projects is what Eisner (1991) refers to as "productive unpredictability—creative thinking" (p. 103). Not only reading and writing, but play, visual art, music, dance, drama, observation, and investigation provide multiple ways for children to "get to the heart of a subject." Wills (1995) contrasts an integrated, inquiry-driven curriculum with a traditional prescriptive approach to teaching in which learning is viewed from a linear perspective "much like a train racing along a railroad track:"

The course is predetermined and no detours are allowed. The only variable is the speed with which the journey is made. An unusually quick trip denotes a child whose learning ability is above grade level; an on-



time arrival denotes a child at grade-level. All educators are familiar with the many labels for those who arrive late. Of course, many of those late arrivals never complete the trip, eventually choosing to jump from the train (p. 262).

**Choosing a project.** To enhance children's ability to make sense of their world, projects should be relevant to their lives outside the classroom, drawing from children's knowledge, interests, and experience. Choices of projects for young children are limited only by time, resources, and the collective imagination of the classroom. Global themes—change, freedom, relationships, patterns, communication, and others—are especially well-suited to integration. Once a topic has been selected, teachers and children brainstorm what they think they know about the topic and what they want to know. Making a “web” or a concept map—a mental representation of concepts and relationships—helps extend the theme and provides an overview of resources and activities that can aid in the investigation.

Topics are explored from multiple perspectives using a variety of printed information, manipulable materials, and resources from the community—people, animals, and places—that contribute to children's understanding of a theme (Pappas, Keifer, & Levstik, 1990). Opportunities for children to express themselves in multiple languages—visual art, music, drama, dance—are particularly important for children from linguistically and cultur-

ally diverse backgrounds. Projects that free children from the need to express themselves only in words help to build concepts and bridge language differences (Abramson, Robinson, & Ankenman, 1995).

### **Research support for a strong arts program.**

A growing body of research suggests that art and music support children's overall development (Hancock, 1996). In particular, spatial reasoning—a skill critical for success in science and math—may be enhanced by musical experiences. According to a University of California at Irvine study, three- and-four-year-olds learning piano scored an average of 34 percent higher on a test of spatial reasoning than children instructed in computer use. Music, drama, and arts instruction have been linked to higher SAT scores and higher scores on tests of creative thinking, art appreciation, reading, vocabulary, and math (Hancock, 1996).

Although “extracurricular activities” such as music and gym are often the first to be cut, educators would do well to develop an appreciation of the vital role of play in a child's

healthy development. Children need many opportunities to cultivate their imagi-

nations and engage their emotions through drama, athletics, art, music, and dance. Integrating these separate disciplines into the curriculum supports the development of literacy—written, oral, and aesthetic.

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rather than seeking correct  
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of a research project.



## 9. Monitoring Children's Progress

*Evaluation practices, particularly testing practices, operationalize the school's values. More than what educators say, more than what they write in curriculum guides, evaluation practices tell both students and teachers what counts (Eisner, 1991, p. 81).*

learning from the child's point of view. Vivian Paley (see pages 26-30 in this document) writes about the important role of self-reflection and sensitive attention to children's perspectives:

The act of teaching became a daily search for the child's point of view, accompanied by the sometimes unwelcome disclosure of my hidden attitudes. The search was what mat-

tered—only later did someone tell me it was research—and it provided an open-ended script from which to observe, interpret, and integrate the living drama of the classroom (1989, p. 7).

In the last 10 years there has been a proliferation of authentic-assessment strategies that provide a

comprehensive picture of children's learning and development. These strategies provide valuable information to share with parents, and they provide information to individualize and improve instruction. Following are brief summaries of authentic assessments that can help guide instructional decisions regarding literacy:

As Eisner (1991) points out, evaluation practices have a profound influence not only on instruction but also on the school climate itself. In schools that support children's emergent literacy, authentic assessments that reflect the child's performance during typical activities in the classroom are the primary assessment strategy. Teachers are encouraged to be "kid watchers" (a term coined by Yetta Goodman in 1978), seeking to understand



**Writing assessment.** The six writing traits used to assess children's writing in grades three and above have been adapted for children in the primary grades (Spandel, 1996). At the primary level, these traits are noticeable in artwork, storytelling, and speaking before children are able to reproduce these features in their own writing:

■ **Ideas:** Look for details in children's artwork and storytelling.

■ **Organization:** Think balance and harmony.

■ **Voice:** Individuality! Sparkle! Love of writing, drawing, life itself.

■ **Word choice:** Look for original expression, and note children's curiosity about word meanings or usage.

■ **Sentence fluency:** The rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of the word pattern. Fluent writing has cadence, power, rhythm, and movement.

■ **Conventions:** Notice and acknowledge beginning use of conventions, such as: writing from left to right, beginning at the top of the page, facing all the "E's" the same way, and putting spaces between the words. Later, children will attend to spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar.

**Retellings.** In a retelling, children—orally or in writing—retell a selected text to convey their understanding of it, including all relevant details, responses, inferences, and associations. Retellings are both *good instruction* and *good assessment*. Retellings enrich students' language in all its forms—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The benefits include greater oral language complexity, improved reading comprehension, increased aware-

ness of the different ways in which texts are structured, greater articulation of connections within and between texts, and heightened use of literacy language and genre-specific conventions in students' own writing and speaking. Retellings provide the teacher with a window into students' reading strategies, background experiences relevant to the text, and understandings of particular texts (Braunger, 1996).

**Running records of oral text reading.** In *Highlight My Strengths: Assessment and Evaluation of Literacy Learning*, Leanna Traill (1993) describes running records as "the most insightful, informative, and instructionally useful assessment procedure you can use for monitoring a child's progress in learning to read." Developed by Marie Clay, running records are a form of miscue analysis. Regie Routman (1994) explains:

The teacher observes, records, and analyzes any unexpected words the child says in the process of reading aloud a connected text. Running records are used for instructional purposes to evaluate the child's reading behaviors and set directions for teaching, to check the difficulty of a text for a child, and to monitor progress. Although it is possible to teach yourself to take a running record, the easiest and best way to learn it is to have a trained Reading Recovery (a short-term early intervention designed to reduce and prevent reading failure) teacher demonstrate for you and practice with you (p. 325).

**Individualizing instruction.** Routman (1994) recommends combining running records with retellings and using running records with good readers about three times a year, and about every six weeks with struggling readers. In addition, careful observation of children's literacy activities and frequent conferences in which teachers talk things over with children can provide information about learning styles, attitudes, strengths, and needs.

Literature logs of books read provides another important piece of information. All of these assessments can provide information that helps teachers match books with children's reading level, as evidenced by their ability to read the words in the text with 90 to 95 percent accuracy. Based on careful assessment, teachers can also provide "mini-lessons" tailored to the needs of each child. For example, if a child is consistently having trouble reading or writing particular com-

binations of letters, such as *br* or with endings or beginnings of words, teachers can target these sounds.

**Portfolio assessment.** Over the last few years, the use of portfolios for children of all ages has gained in popularity. Portfolios are an organized collection of children's work that provide a continuous record of a child's progress over time and typically travel with the child throughout the primary grades. One of the strengths of portfolios is that they reflect multiple voices and perspectives: those of children, parents, and teachers. Based on the assumption that children should be active participants in their own assessment (rather than passive objects of assessment), children are encouraged to make judgments about their own work and reflect on their progress during frequent individual and group conferences. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) observe:

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Portfolios have the potential to reveal a lot about their creators.

They can become a window into the

### ONE OF THE STRENGTHS

OF PORTFOLIOS is that they reflect multiple voices and perspectives: those of children, parents, and teachers.

students' heads, a means for both staff and students to understand the educational process at the level of the individual learner. They can be powerful educational

tools for encouraging students to take charge of their own learning (p. 61).

Language arts portfolios may include writing samples, art work, self-portraits, stories, audiotapes of children's oral reading and speaking, photographs, teacher and parent reflections, summaries of progress, and children's reflective comments about their work. Because portfolios are the result of a collaboration between teachers, children, and parents, they play a critical role in helping to develop shared meaning and shared memories.

In summary, effective assessment is integrated with curriculum content and instructional strategies, providing information that is valued by teachers, parents, and children. Such an approach, in Meisels, Dorfman, and Steele's words (1995), "puts assessment back where it belongs—in the hands of teachers and children, and in the classrooms in which they work."

## Conclusion

*Do not underestimate your power as an educator: your power to make all of your students feel included, and perhaps, most importantly, your power to plant hope (Wu, 1992).*

At the heart of a balanced literacy curriculum is the understanding that reading is language. Clearly, children need many enjoyable experiences with listening to, reading, and writing meaningful texts. They need demonstrations of strategies for decoding and comprehension. And they need numerous opportunities to share ideas and opinions, to contribute to joint writing of prose and poetry, and to share and extend each others' stories. But, as Cambourne (1995) points out, the key to successful literacy experiences is engagement: "It didn't matter how much immersion in text and language we provided. It didn't matter how riveting, compelling, exciting, or motivating our demonstrations were; if students didn't engage with language, no learning could occur" (p. 186).

Entering an imaginary world through reading and creating an imaginary world through writing are intellectually demanding tasks. In order to do so, children must be able to meaningfully connect new information with prior knowledge and experience, make the sustained effort required by reading and writing for meaning, and be confident in their ability to be successful. Children who have had few positive experiences with reading and writing may struggle with one or all of these necessary conditions for true engagement.

Research on resiliency has highlighted the pivotal role of teachers in the lives of young children (see Handout 18). According to Cambourne (1995), "Learners are more likely to engage with demonstrations given by someone they like, respect, admire, trust, and would like to emulate" (p. 188). If schools are to help all children to become lifelong readers and writers, careful attention to relationships—both within the school and among the school and families and the larger community—is crucial. In an action-research project at a Missouri school, teachers began an effort to improve children's writing with the goal of "fixing the students' writing." Through the case-study research, that goal shifted to "fixing the teaching methods," and finally to "fixing the relationships between teachers and students" (Krater, Zeni, & Cason, cited in Braunger & Lewis, 1997).

Schools, Benard (1993) points out, have become a vital refuge for a growing number of children, "serving as a protective shield to help children withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world" (Garmezy, 1991).

Benard (1993) has identified three key features of families, schools, and communities that have protected children growing up in adversity: caring and support; positive expectations; and ongoing opportunities for participation.

In a longitudinal study of a multiracial cohort of 698 infants on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Werner and Smith (1992) identified children who, despite multiple risk factors, were able to lead productive lives, exhibiting competence, confidence, and caring. One of the key protective factors for these children was the availability of persons who provided them with a secure base for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative. Among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of the children of Kauai, outside the family circle, was a favorite teacher. For the resilient youngsters, a special teacher was not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification. Only when young children feel valued and supported are they free to use and appreciate oral, written, and aesthetic language in all its richness and complexity.

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# Site Profiles

## Helen Gordon Child Development Center, Portland, Oregon: Doing Things with Words in the Real World

*One day there was a sunshine. And the sunshine was unhappy. And why? Because no other suns didn't want to play with him and the sunshine said, "And I don't want to play with the other sunshines either." And she went to play with the sunshine.*

*Once upon a time there was a little girl named Emily, and it was a sad time for her because she fell down at school. Her mother and father were not at home and they never came to pick her up.*

*I'm so mad at Kagan. If you be in front of me, I'll be in front of you. I didn't like it when Kagan sat in front of me. I was there first. I was there before you.*

The study of literacy from the child's point of view has highlighted the role that language plays in the everyday lives of children. Young children, it is clear, learn what language is through what language *does*. At Helen Gordon Child Development Center in Portland, Oregon, children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing—in letters to friends and parents, in poems, and in stories. Supported by teachers who write children's dictated words just as they are spoken, children write about rejection, fears of abandon-

ment, and injustice, illustrated by the stories above. As Steve Franzel, a teacher of three- to five-year-olds, explains, "Language becomes a way to support children's power—their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. Words empower them to express themselves—to handle life."

Built in 1928 by the Fruit and Flower Mission for children's programs, the brick building's large, comfortable rooms, filled with rocking chairs, couches, and braided rugs, create a welcoming atmosphere. Family groupings (multiage groups of two- to three-year-olds and three- to six-year-olds) add to the homelike feeling. As a visitor ascends the large, open stairway leading to the upstairs preschool class-



rooms, the illustrated messages that line the walls leave little doubt as to the universal nature of the deep concerns of childhood identified by teacher and author Vivian Paley: friendship, security, and fairness. Children also use writing as occasions to play with words, as in this



poem that appears to celebrate a ubiquitous childhood food:

I love my putty daddy.  
 I love my mommy and daddy.  
 I love my peanut butter daddy.  
 I have a haircut.  
 I have a balloon up my nose.  
 A peanut butter crayon up my nose.  
 A peanut butter me. I have a crayon  
 up my nose. I want a Disneyland  
 ride **now**.  
 Mickey Mouse I love.

A song of woe may turn into an alphabet song and an occasion to practice writing letters:

My head hurts and my neck hurts  
 and I want my Mama. Steve's a big  
 old pig. Hair-do Mama. And some-  
 body ripped my crown. Jingle, jingle,  
 hymer. Jingle, jingle ban bee.  
 ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
 —Next time won't you sing with me?

Children's stories, poems, and letters are displayed in classrooms and hallways and kept in laminated books, which the children read to themselves and with each other. Many of the four-to-five-year-olds recognize their classmates' entries and can "read" them verbatim. Children often read their own messages to themselves after they are written, matching print to their remembered words. But the primary purpose of writing is to identify and express thoughts and feelings. Franzel explains:

I usually use writing as a means to a goal, to validate children's feelings about separation, to help resolve conflict—as crisis prevention. I hear someone screaming and I go over to help them use their words to express

their needs and feelings. Then I ask the child, "Do you want to write it down, write a letter?"



The process is such an integral part of the day's activities that the children explain it to new adults in the classroom and expect them to take dictation, just as they might expect their shoes to be tied. Frequently throughout the day, children use writing to sort out their feelings and at times to come to terms with their own behavior. For example, the following letter was written after four-year-old Tony watched his classmate leave for the doctor to have stitches in his forehead, following an altercation involving a broom. As Tony thought about what to write to Mark, anger was replaced by a sense of responsibility:

I'm sorry Mark. I hit you with the broom. Why did you want to take my broom? I was just about to color with the chalk and you were trying to take my broom. I was coloring in 5 seconds. I wanted to give him a hug before he left.

Resolving conflict through negotiation and problem solving and helping children to understand and assume responsibility for their own behavior are at the center of this preschool curriculum. In turn, staff are responsible for providing a "secure and loving" environment that fosters connections among staff, children, and families. As Amy Jacobson puts it, "the first thing is for children to feel valued, important, and loved." Many of Helen Gordon's children spend more than 40 hours a week at the child development center; for such children, separating from parents may be a daily challenge.

A number of strategies are used to ease the transition from home to the classroom. On the balcony adjacent to the classrooms, children have the opportunity to wave a last good-bye to a departing parent. For many children, explains Jacobson, "the transition from home to school is not complete until they are taken outside and they see Mom or Dad wave the last time from the sidewalk. Then they can say, 'Okay, they're gone.' The transition has been made."

Feeling sad about separating from parents is a frequent topic of conversation among children. Teachers encourage children to write notes to their parents, an activity that has been part of the day at Helen Gordon for many years. According to director Ellie Nolan, "It's been a really nice way for us to help children to have a place to put their feelings." Jacobson agrees:

We help children learn that words have meaning and can be used to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas both verbally and on paper. A lot of times children have trouble separating from their parents, feeling very sad. We help them write a letter, to

express their feelings: "I miss my Mommy, I want my Mommy." We write their words exactly as they say them. If they say, "I hurted my knee," that's what we write. That's a validation of their feelings, their ideas.

It also helps them to connect the feelings they had in the morning when they said good-bye with how they feel at the end of the day. They can see, "Oh, yeah, I wrote that to you this morning, but then I did all these other things. And the child can see that they were able to part with the sad feelings and get past it.

### **Fostering a Knowledgeable, Self-Confident Self-Identity**

Helping children to identify and label feelings is not only an important part of learning to control one's behavior, but is

I miss Mama  
and I wish I couldn't be at school.  
And I want to go trick-or-treat.  
And I love Mommy.  
And I want to go with my Papa to  
buy toys for me.  
I want my Mama to be a teacher.  
And naptime, I don't, I'm not sleepy.  
I feel like I want to be a princess.  
Right now  
I'm done.

Once upon a time there was an old fire truck.  
I want my daddy  
now, now, now, now, now now!  
And I want my daddy now, now, now, now,  
now, now, noooow, noooow!

Teachers encourage children to write notes to their parents, an activity that has been part of the day at Helen Gordon for many years.

also a crucial step in understanding how others think and feel. As in many early childhood programs, fostering a positive sense of self is an important goal at this center. But rather than encouraging an inward focus—an “I am special because ...” approach, characterized by early childhood educator Lillian Katz as fostering a “collection of self-absorbed individuals”—staff at Helen Gordon work to create a sense of community.

Their curriculum reflects the “three Cs” of motivation, described by educator Alfie Kohn (1994): collaboration, choice, and content. According to the parent handbook, “The daily classroom schedules include large blocks of time in which children, with support from teachers, make their own choices about how to use their time.” Influenced by the High/Scope curriculum, teachers provide materials and design hands-on experiences that build on children’s interests and foster children’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth.

Made up of several adjoining rooms, the classroom settings for each group of children offer a wide variety of activities and different environments. At any given time, children are dictating stories; collaborating on solving puzzles; making Play Doh and ublech; jumping on a trampoline to music; walking across a balance beam; making a tent city out of a couch, chairs, and a parachute; stringing Cheerio necklaces; making up rules to Candyland; reading stories to each other; climbing and jumping on a jungle gym in the solarium; and enjoying a number of messy art and water activities in the art room that doubles as a lunch room. The comfortable furniture and ample space also provide cozy nooks and crannies where children

can curl up with a book, a stuffed animal, and an occasional thumb—a necessity for children who may spend nine hours a day at the center.

In their efforts to ensure that “every child and family feel welcomed and supported by the program,” staff draw on the anti-bias curriculum developed by Louise Derman-Sparks and her colleagues at



Pacific Oaks College (1989). The goals of an anti-bias curriculum are stated in the parent handbook and posted in classrooms. An anti-bias curriculum:

- Fosters each child’s sense of self-identity
- Fosters acceptance of diversity among people by allowing children to ask about and explore differences
- Encourages critical thinking about bias by helping children to identify acts of discrimination and stereotypic images in their world
- Encourages empathy toward others
- Fosters each child’s ability to stand up for herself or himself and others in the face of bias

Director Ellie Nolan became convinced of the importance of this curriculum for all young children as a result of years of experience as a teacher as well as other life experiences. The parent handbook explains, "We continually strive to provide materials, activities, and an environment that reflect a respect for, and celebration of, diversity in race and ethnicity, physical appearance and ability, and family composition and lifestyle." While at first staff were "continually aware of making dramatic changes," the philosophy is now an integral part of the school culture. Inservice training and after-hours book groups, where teachers read and discuss books such as *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* by Lisa Delpit and *Celebrate* by Julie Bisson (a book about celebrating holidays in an anti-bias curriculum), include everyone in an ongoing dialogue about culturally responsive teaching and learning.

A wide variety of multicultural and bias-free books, dolls, and learning activities ensure that all children see themselves and their families reflected in the classroom environment. "Children need to know that they can choose a book and find themselves in it," notes Jacobson. Families are invited to share pictures, photographs, and stories on the family bulletin boards that feature a different family each week. Labels of classroom areas and objects are written in many of the languages that are represented in the culturally diverse classrooms—Farsi, Bulgarian, Polish, Swahili, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese—adding to the print-rich and culturally responsive environment.

### A Calm, Unhurried Atmosphere

Helen Gordon is Portland State University's laboratory preschool/extended day program and follows the guidelines of the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, a division of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The guidelines place great emphasis on "what really happens to the children—the nature of the child's experience," particularly the quality of interactions among staff and children and the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum.

Nolan makes a distinction between "a lab school whose primary goal is to be there for the students to have that experience" versus "our school, whose primary goal is to have a program for the children, though, of course, we welcome and appreciate the participation of university students." Serving as a lab school ensures that student teachers and practicum students are always present to supplement

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the already low child-teacher ratios: a one to four teacher-to-child ratio in the two- to three-year-olds, and a one to six teacher-to-child ratio in programs for three- to six-year-olds. Dividing the larger group

of children into smaller groups several times a week provides opportunities for children to learn sign language, do math activities, plant a garden, act out a play, and get to know each other better.

The comfortable homelike setting, the developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive curriculum, and the low student-teacher ratios combine to create an unhurried atmosphere—where children's sense of time and concerns are at the center. The day is planned with as few disruptions as possible. When children must leave an activity to go to the bathroom, cards are used to save their place. Because children can move freely among a variety of activities, transitions are minimized, and when transitions do occur, ample warning is given. When a tent city made of couches, chairs, and a parachute—an activity that lasted all morning—had to be disassembled in order to prepare for lunch, children were given the time to draw a detailed map of their creation so that they could re-create it later that day.

**A mix of planned and child-initiated activities.** Just as parents might at home, teachers use daily routines as occasions for unhurried, child-centered conversations—about a recent field trip or other memorable school activity, a new baby, or a visiting grandparent. Families are included in literacy activities in a number of ways: children's letters to parents, the family bulletin board, a lending library, and in journal writing. Every Friday, three stuffed bunnies—Nickey, Humpty Dumpling, and Rosy—go home with children, and children and parents draw pictures and write about their experiences in a shared journal.

"Story starters" are often used to help children get started with a story; teachers have found that writing in response to a picture fosters the creative use of language, aesthetic sensitivity, and abstract thinking. Pictures are spread out on a table and children choose their own picture, one that is interesting to them. Children are asked to "think about the picture and dictate a story or impression." Jacobson explains, "Just to be able to think of a story is extremely abstract

—to look at a picture of an animal or person and think of something that could be happening and build on it." In this response to a picture, Justin moves from description to fantasy:

The mountain is wonderful. I like it a lot. I like people climbing on it. Sometimes I like to climb down the mountain and swim in the water. That's a sun shadow on the picture. It looks like a rock in the water. I see cracks on land. I see bushes in the back. I think I would like to see a seagull. I want to ride on a whale's back.

Inspired by poems read to her by her grandfather and in the classroom, a four-year-old wrote a poem in this response to a picture of a forest scene. She entitled it "Green:"

Birds are colorful.  
The rainbow that's not there.  
Why do I wonder "why" everyday?  
Because I can't remember why.

**THE COMFORTABLE HOME-LIKE SETTING**, the developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive curriculum, and the low student-teacher ratios combine to create an unhurried atmosphere—where children's sense of time and concerns are at the center.



Birds like rainbows—flutter in the sky.  
But where is the rainbow?

**Flights of fancy.** Teachers also provide opportunities to write using teacher-suggested themes. But when you are four, things are often not what they seem—activities that appear fairly straightforward from an adult point of view have a way of taking on a life of their own. Today, a Batman story-writing activity is rapidly transformed into several related fantasies when Megan announces, “I’m making a kite to take to the beach.” In rapid succession, the cut-out Batman symbol first becomes a kite when a string is glued on, then a puppet with a Popsicle stick attached. Adorned with colored tissue paper, it becomes a “dancing thing for two,” and Megan and her friend dance together

while singing their own musical accompaniment.

Spying a book that has been left on the couch in the reading corner, the two girls take the book to the center rug to continue their dance, finally settling into an absorbing activity that combines both reading and dancing. For a quarter of an hour, while Anna “reads” aloud from a book on young children and the ballet, Megan studies the pictures of young dancers and copies their positions with precision. Later, after they reverse their roles, the ballerinas are taken prisoner and must do their time in a Boston rocking chair, whose slats become the bars of a jail.

Teachers appreciate and encourage such flights of fancy and help children link pretend play to stories by encouraging children to act out favorites, such as *The Carrot Seed*, *The Paper Bag Princess*, and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Children also spontaneously act out stories, both their own and the stories that are read to them. They change rapidly from mothers, fathers, and babies to ballet dancers, butterflies, prisoners, princesses, pirates, and superheroes. Often one child turns the pages of a book, while others create makeshift costumes and act out the parts. A performance of the Nutcracker ballet viewed by a child at Christmas inspired dances and dramatic play for months afterwards.

### **Opportunities to read, read, read.**

Helen Gordon’s bookshelves and supply closets spill over with hundreds of inviting titles. Teachers frequently visit the local libraries, bringing as many as 50 books to the classrooms every few weeks. Books chosen for the classrooms are visually engaging and rich with expressive lan-





guage; those that become favorites are purchased for the classroom. But Jacobson cautions, "I try to check books out of the library before I decide to make them part of the classroom. I can see a book and think it's the most wonderful, touching story with beautiful artwork, and the kids just don't see it." Eric Carle, Maurice Sendak, and Leo Lionni are favorite authors, but when issues important for children need to be addressed, other less esteemed authors are read—stories about getting lost, making a mess, a new sibling, breaking something, or the death of a grandparent. Nancy Carlson's *Arnie and the Stolen Markers* inspired one child to write a story about her own experience with stealing a toy. Parents can check these books out from the school lending library to read at home with their children.

Reading stories occurs many times a day—at opening circle, before naps, at the end of the day, and just about any time a child requests a story. When three-year-old Amanda announced that she was going in from outside play to hear a story, a visitor asked who would read it to her. "Why anyone I ask, of course," came the indignant reply. Favorite books are read many times, and children frequently read the memorized books to themselves and to each other. Predictable books that offer opportunities for children to chime in on the refrains are popular; chapter books, such as *Stewart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* help children calm down for naptime. "It's surprising how even the youngest children listen well and remember a long, complicated story," notes Laura West, a teacher of three- to five-year-olds.

### Keeping track of literacy develop-

**ment.** At home visits at the beginning of the year, teachers and parents jointly plan learning goals for all children. Samples of children's writing and drawing kept in portfolios provide documentation of progress to share with children and families. Because teachers, in director Ellie Nolan's words, "know kids and know what they need," anecdotal records accompany the work samples and add context and detail to the picture of a child's literacy development.

For example, teachers record children's development from an understanding of picture symbols

(e.g., understanding that a tree can stand for their name on their cubby) to the more abstract concept that letters are symbols that represent the spoken word. Through repeated readings of favorite storybooks, songs, and their own poems and letters, many children are well on their way to cracking the sound-print code by the time they leave Helen Gordon for public school.

### READING STORIES OCCURS

#### MANY TIMES A DAY—at

opening circle, before naps, at the end of the day, and just about any time a child requests a story.

### Conclusion

At a time when play is once again falling into disrepute and playgrounds on some of our nation's schools are being eliminated, teachers at Helen Gordon are not tempted to alter their curriculum in response to the pressures to "get children ready for next year." They are confident that by providing many opportunities for learning about literacy in the context of meaningful activities, children will not only learn literacy skills but also acquire the habits of mind that lead to lifelong reading and writing.

Staff have created an environment similar to the homes of children, who learn to read “naturally.” Child-centered conversations, singing, poetry, pretend play, painting and drawing, storytelling, story dramatization, a print-rich environment, and reading stories provide the experiences that the children need to develop their imaginations, a narrative voice, and a love of language. Many varied experi-

ences enable children to use all of their senses and intelligences to establish a rich conceptual base—one that allows them to make connections between what they know and understand and the knowledge and concepts encountered in new environments. And written language—like oral language—is learned, in Bruner’s (1983) phrase, by doing things with words in the real world.



## Helen Baller Elementary School, Camas, Washington: Highlight My Strengths

**A**t Helen Baller Elementary School in Camas, Washington, staff have defined education broadly, to include emotional as well as academic competence. They feel that establishing caring relationships, building on strengths, offering choices, and encouraging responsibility, problem solving, and communications skills are key to establishing a community where all children can learn. One of the key resources for their literacy curriculum, *Highlight My Strengths* by Leanna Traill, quotes a Maori saying: "Highlight my strengths, and my weaknesses will disappear." To convey that message, the entire staff works together to support children and their families. "Education," as a poster in the hall announces, "takes everyone."

"Literacy is the main thrust," principal Pat Edwards explains. "Everything revolves around it; without it, children can't do math, they can't function." Over the years, the entire staff, including both classified and certified, have engaged in reading, reflecting, and practicing strategies learned from Regie Routman's *Invitations and Literacy at the Crossroads*, Leanna Traill's *Highlight My Strengths*, and a number of books from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, including *Dancing with the Pen* and *Reading in the Junior Classes*. This year they have added *Improving Reading* by Jerry Johns and Susan Davis Lenski, and *Balanced Reading Instruction* by Jerry Johns and Laurie Elish-Piper.

A district early release time each Wednesday provides needed time to introduce and discuss new research and literature. Staff have also benefited from videos and presentations on numerous literacy strategies developed in New Zealand that are increasingly finding their way into American classrooms. In order to provide individualized reading instruction, staff have leveled books and created a Centralized Reading

Resource that is available to all teachers. Edwards and a number of teachers have visited New Zealand for an intensive study of their literacy program and have shared their expertise with the entire staff. In addition, a representative from the Wright Group has demonstrated shared and guided reading and writing.

Although Reading Recovery is considered too costly, many of the strategies used in this program have been integrated into the regular program. In particular, the emphasis on helping children develop a range of flexible strategies, rather than memorizing isolated rules, is key to their reading program. Assessment that provides information to individualize instruction is considered critical. "That way," explains second-grade teacher, Alona Dickerson, kids can't fall through the cracks—we know exactly where they are and where they need to go. Before we learned to use assessment tools that helped us individualize instruction, we often taught to the group in the middle. We had to pull some kids back and pull some kids along who weren't ready."

Teachers use a variety of assessments that provide information on reading and

**"LITERACY IS THE MAIN THRUST,"** Edwards explains. "Everything revolves around it; without it, children can't do math, they can't function."

writing strategies, vocabulary growth, and comprehension. The six writing traits—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions—developed by Vickie Spandel (1996) are used to evaluate third-grade writing. Running records allow teachers to keep track of what words children know and to identify strategies that emergent readers are using. The *Basic Reading Inventory* by Jerry Johns provides information on children's comprehension skills. Basal assessments provide a cross-reference for less traditional assessments, and have the added advantage of helping children become accustomed to a basal format—a format that they might encounter later in their elementary years.

covered with blue calico to match the curtains, sprawled on the circle rug, individually and with friends, in a teepee, and even in a plastic bathtub filled with pillows. Children read the print-filled walls and songs and poems they have memorized, and they choose books from their own learning logs (in which they write their own stories) and from the "browsing box," which includes a favorite book, an "I can read" book, and a new book. Literacy-enhanced play centers—filled with puzzles, games, a listening center, computers, poems, and Play Doh—allow children to "find their comfort level before branching out to other forms of literacy." Dickerson explains:

This way, with so many choices, children can be successful right off the bat. We don't just give them a worksheet and if they can't do it, they just sit there or disrupt the class. When we just used basals, they could only read the basal texts—it didn't transfer to other books. Now they never say, "I can't read, I can't write." At whatever level they are, they can do it. They feel like they're free, but really we've set it up so they can be successful. The freedom empowers them to be learners, and it has almost eliminated discipline problems.

Many reading strategies are learned through poems and songs that the class recites and sings as a group, while Dickerson or children point to the words. At the beginning of each week, all first- and second-grade classrooms are introduced to a new rhyming poem or song that is easily memorized. As a group, children



At Helen Baller, staff are quick to point out that children in their classes "don't just learn to read—they read to learn." A poster in the hallway proclaiming "Ten ways to become a better reader—read, read, read, read, read, read, read, read, read, read" is put into practice throughout the school.

### **Alona Dickerson's Classroom**

In Alona Dickerson's second-grade classroom, children read in a variety of ways: in the inviting reading nook on benches

identify words that they do not yet know by sight. Because they learn the new words in an enjoyable group activity, it is easy for children to read them and to find them in other contexts. "Learning new words, phonics, punctuation, and spelling rules through poems and songs helps children see connections everywhere," notes Dickerson:

Children say, "Look, I see a c followed by an e." They begin to see patterns. We catch them in different ways—we catch them with music, with the visual arts—everyone learns differently. And singing also builds community. Every week, an illustrated poem book goes home and parents are included in the community through sharing the poem with their children.

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Although Dickerson is an articulate and enthusiastic spokesperson for the philosophy and practices she learned in her visit to New Zealand and from subsequent study, she wasn't always convinced of the worth of literature-based approaches. "I was the ditto queen," confesses Dickerson. "I believed that my job was to keep the kids busy while I worked with reading groups. It took a while before it felt okay to read out loud and to give kids time to read and discuss what they read." But seeing children, particularly struggling readers, become successful and confident readers and writers has allayed her earlier fears that children's skills might suffer in a non-traditional classroom.

**Building on strengths.** Based on levels of support outlined in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* (Fountas,

Pinnell, & Su, 1996), each day, teachers at Helen Baller provide many opportunities for children to read and write with varying levels of instructional support. For example, children engage in listening to stories (the teacher provides full support for children to access the text), shared reading (when an experienced reader points to the text and invites children to read along), and independent reading. Similarly, children's writing is supported through dictating stories, opportunities for teacher-guided group writing, writing conferences, and independent writing.

Classrooms are set up to provide children with the tools they need to be successful writers, without depending on their teacher for all instruction. Word cards with common words stuck to the wall, poems and songs on chart pack, dictionaries of varying sizes, "banks" of "juicy" words (adjectives and verbs), and walls filled with print—charts, posters, and children's



work—provide multiple ways for children to learn to spell. Today, children are writing in their journals, talking quietly to each other, and occasionally reading their stories out loud. "How do you spell caterpil-

lar?" asks Rosalie. And the answers come quickly. "Look in your pocket dictionary." "Look on the word cards." "Ask Jeanette." But Rosalie thinks of a quicker way to spell the word and heads for the insect chart.

Dickerson demonstrates a new word in the poem of the week: Strutting.



Cooperative learning capitalizes on children's strengths; by pairing children with different abilities, children learn from each other. Journal writing is used to build fluency with writing and as a means of evaluating progress and establishing individual goals. Although some children can write only a sentence or two while others are writing paragraphs, all can successfully meet their goals and enjoy an individual conference with their principal, where they show off their new skills. By providing a large array of available resources for spelling and encouraging children to use developmental or "functional" spelling, children are free to concentrate on the content of their writing. Before it was time for lunch, Nathan was

well on his way to answering the age-old question of why cats kill mice and had solved the riddle of why dogs chase cats:

#### Chapter 1 Why do dogs chase CATS?

Once upon a time in a far away land there was a young cat and two kittens. One day a dog came. But in this land dogs don't chase cats they like cats. And the dog saw the kittens and wanted to play with them so he asked the young cat. And He said NO! so the dog got mad and fought. So for now on they set an example for other dogs.

Each day, at the end of journal writing time, some children share their journals with the class as a group—a favorite activity. Although there is not enough time for everyone to share their stories individually every day, children enjoy retiring to a comfortable spot to read their entries with a friend. Dickerson does not lament the loss of her role as "dispenser of information."

At the end of the day I don't say, "My lecture was great, I did a great job today." I say, "The kids did a really good job today," and they leave saying it to themselves. It takes a lot of time to set up but the rewards are worth it. When we were using only basals, only six children in my first-grade classroom reached the level of *Beth's Bear Hug*, a book at second-grade proficiency. Last year, only six of 26 first-graders *didn't* make it *all the way through* the book. And this year, 15 of 25 second-graders are reading at the fourth-to-sixth-grade level. Only one student, who came at the end of the year, is not reading at grade level.



**Conclusion**

One of the key conditions for learning described by Brian Cambourne (1995) is that learners must be free to *approximate* the desired model or outcome. Staff at Helen Baller work together to create an atmosphere that helps children feel free to take risks—to make mistakes and to try again, and to use temporary, adjustable help (scaffolds) to support their learning. Children read songs and poems

they have memorized, their own learning logs, the print-filled walls, in literacy enhanced learning centers, and with a friend. “A primary goal of education at Helen Baller,” explains Edwards, “is to allow children to explore and problem solve; we want to make children aware that they have something to say about what happens, that they can make a choice and that their choices *do* matter.”



## Cherry Valley Elementary School, Polson, Montana: A Collective Vision

Located on the southern shores of Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, and on the outskirts of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Cherry Valley Elementary School serves a culturally and economically diverse student body. Increasing numbers of children come from families who live at or below the poverty line, with almost 60 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In addition, a large proportion of Native American children challenges the predominantly white, middle-class teaching staff to examine their own values in order to provide a school environment that reduces cultural discontinuities and builds on the strengths of all children.

According to principal Elaine Meeks, creating a positive school environment, as seen through the eyes of *each* child, is essential to convey the school's overriding belief: "Every child counts." Fostering cooperation, rather than competition among children and among staff, creates a climate in which everyone is encouraged to help

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each other solve problems, share expertise, listen respectfully to one another, and resolve conflict openly and hon-

estly. Staff consider this emphasis on teamwork and community to be a crucial element in the school's continually evolving interpretation and implementation of

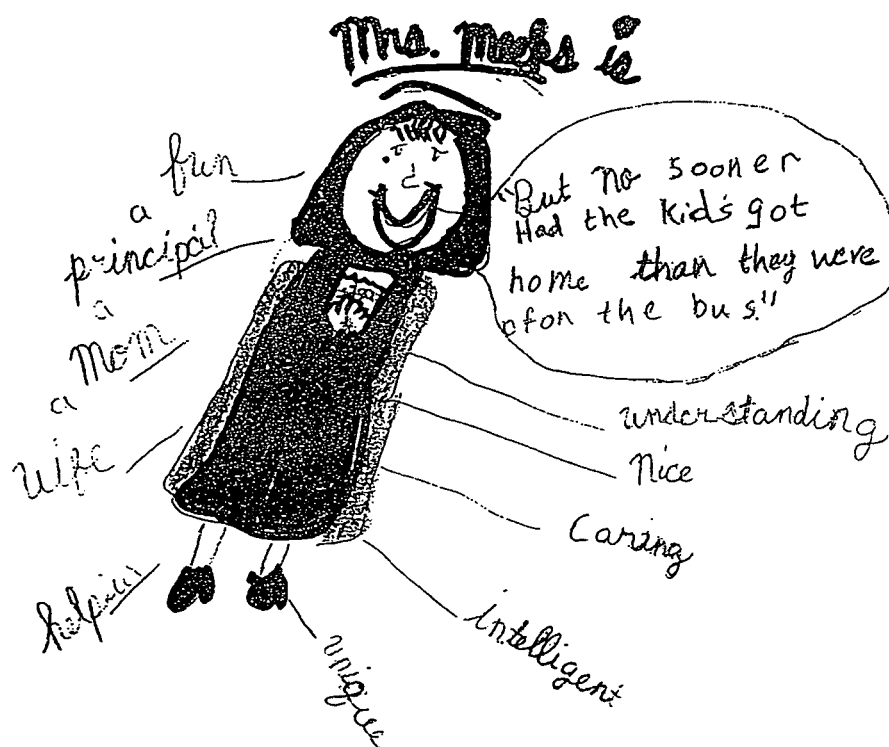
developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive teaching.

In her 25 years as a teacher and principal, Meeks has seen a lot of change. She observed that in the late 1970s and 1980s, a downward extension of academic curricula into kindergarten led teachers to "see how quiet the kids could be and how much seat work they could complete." During this time, she gradually learned to articulate her own philosophy about how children learn and develop. But she also knew that, like children, adults need to construct their own understandings and theories: "A vision needs to be collective; it emerges from the culture. You can't get people to support someone else's vision." Utilizing what she refers to as a "female, relationship-based model of administration," the change that she envisioned for Cherry Valley was and continues to be a slow process, whose primary approach to staff development involves individual and collective inquiry into teaching practices.

Working in partnership with staff, Meeks originally spent a lot of time observing and questioning. For example, she might ask, "Why did you group the children the way you did?" In this way, teachers were asked to articulate their own theories of practices, moving from, "That's the way we've always done it," to more indepth study and research into their practices. Rather than technicians, teachers are viewed (and encouraged to view themselves) as professional educators.

From the beginning, teachers and students responded positively to this approach, and both teachers and students increasingly engaged in experiential learning activities centered on themes, including multicultural topics. Teachers valued

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and she reads great books!

A child's depiction of Meeks in her multiple roles.

these educational explorations and formed study groups to discuss such books as Regie Routman's *Transitions and Invitations*, books that many schools have used for support in making the change to more meaning-focused approaches to reading and writing. Meeks continues to spend time in each classroom, serving as teacher, reader of stories, and role model.

In 1992, a Literacy Leadership Team was formed, an expansion of a team of teachers who had previously participated in a NWREL summer institute, *Building Equity in Early Literacy: A Team Approach*. Over the past four years, although mem-

bership is voluntary, the team has included almost every teacher in the school and has been expanded to include parents and support staff. By the spring of 1993, with staff input the team had developed the "Primary Education Philosophy," which is revisited each year, a process Meeks describes as "a wonderful experience that reflects the power of the school as a whole." The philosophy statement emphasizes the importance of shared responsibility for creating a positive environment for children's learning and the importance of active engagement and social interac-

tion in children's construction of understanding.

Open communication with parents has been an essential part of creating an inclusive school community. Including parents in decisionmaking and schoolwide activities helps parents feel a part of the school community. Meeks explains:

A team process has been developed at Cherry Valley whereby responsibility is shared for all aspects of the school community. This creates an atmosphere where children and families feel a sense of trust, attachment, and a sense of belonging not only to the school, but to the community as well. When families feel support and encouragement from the school community and practice the values it promotes, their children will succeed academically and socially.

### Changing Practices

By the 1992-93 school year, Cherry Valley had made a number of changes in classroom practices. Almost all classrooms had increased their use of children's literature. Teachers read aloud to students on a daily basis and parents were encouraged to do the same. Worksheets and basals had been replaced with books from a number of sources, including Richard C. Owen (*Ready to Read Series*), the Wright Group (*Sunshine, Story Box, Twig*), Pegasus, Rigby, and a number of trade books. That same year, Cherry Valley invited community members to participate as guest readers in Celebrate Literacy Week, a project collaboratively planned by the staff. An evening open house exhibited children's

work, and in a total school assembly, children voted for the school's favorite book.

During the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years, a literacy fair, designed both to celebrate children's literacy accomplishments and educate the community about Cherry Valley's approach to literacy instruction, was open to the public for a full day and evening. At the fair, a packet of materials, including a teacher-created handout of reading strategies, provided parents with practical suggestions to help their child with reading. The *Cherry Valley Literacy News*, also in the packet, is a collection of articles written by teachers in which they discuss a number of topics, including Big Books, literacy in the preschool setting, process writing, and the role of phonics in the Cherry Valley literacy curriculum.

Although Meeks describes the change process as necessarily slow, to an occasional visitor the changes in practice are striking. Jane Braunger, a NWREL staff member and literacy specialist who helped organize the 1992 summer literacy institute, visited the school as part of the Equi-

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### From the Cherry Valley Literacy News

This approach to literacy instruction is not anti-skills. In fact, phonics and spelling are important strategies that are taught in context as part of a whole, exciting, meaningful and appropriate program for the child. Each child is an individual, progressing on this journey at their own rate. Together, parents and teachers can support and celebrate as our children grow in their own ability to read, write, and speak.

## Philosophy Cherry Valley School

We believe learning is a process that begins at birth and is lifelong. Consideration of equity and diversity are a basis for ensuring success for all students. Varying social contexts allow children to purposefully select, interpret, and integrate information about their world. All students are expected to become confident, resourceful, disciplined, and self-motivated learners. Responsibility to self and community are emphasized.

Meaningful acquisition and application of content knowledge and process skills is achieved through problem solving, critical thinking, decisionmaking, and creativity. There are opportunities for student choice and time for discovery learning with student experience being central to instruction.

Literacy is the primary and most essential goal for all students. Literacy is defined as proficiency in not only the written and spoken word, but also includes numeracy, the arts, and emotions. The curriculum is presented in an integrated format respectful of individual learning styles and abilities. Flexible groupings are based on the nature of the activity and varying rates of growth and development of individual children.

Learning occurs most effectively in a culture that is safe and nurturing. School personnel, parents, and the community share the responsibility to work together to provide a positive school environment.

ty in Early Literacy Project. In her case study of Cherry Valley, she writes:

Returning to the school in May 1995 (after two years), I felt as if I had stepped into a life-sized pop-up book. "Wall stories," composed by different primary classes took me on a physical reading experience as they stretched down the hallway and around the corner. In some cases the stories, in children's own words, had been typed and enlarged through computer technology; in others, children's own handwriting carried the message. I recognized the influence of writers such as Joy Cowley and Eric Carle and enjoyed reading children's original versions of well-learned pattern books and rhyming stories. The stories wound up over classroom doorways decorated to announce the classroom's favorite book. (Each classroom determined its favorite by a vote.) The colorful and inviting room doors beckoned me to come into Charlotte's world (*Charlotte's Web*), Clifford's (*Clifford, the Big Red Dog*), or into the world of any number of appealing characters from children's literature (Braunger, 1995, p. 9).

### Starting Where the Learner Is

A central tenet of Cherry Valley's literacy program is that teaching is tailored to the individual needs of each child. The literacy model advocates that teachers start with the child, understanding his or her strengths and needs and matching the learner with appropriate resources. Relatively small class sizes (20 children in grades one through three, and 24 in third

grade) help teachers to individualize instruction. Community members who serve as "reading visitors" share enjoyable reading experiences with emergent readers, providing additional opportunities for children to read out loud to an adult or listen to a story in a supportive, interactive, one-on-one session.

### **Linking Assessment with Instruction**

A number of assessments help teachers make educational decisions, including literature logs of books read, individual reading conferences, running records (in which teachers keep track of what words children know and strategies used during reading), tapes, and transcriptions or retellings of material read. Key to the assessment process is systematic observation of children engaged in authentic reading and writing activities. Children in kindergarten through second grade are assessed using running records every three weeks. Teachers have found that in the early stages of reading, frequent assessment helps to ensure that each child has opportunities to read books at both the independent level (as evidenced by their ability to read the words with 95 percent accuracy) and at the instructional level (with 90-94 percent accuracy), with teacher and/or peer support.

Writing is assessed using Vickie Spandel's six writing traits—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. In addition, the *Holistic Writing Scale*, developed by Tammy Elser and consistent with the six-trait assessment, provides information on children's progress in fluency and conventions. Both writing samples and graphs of running-record assessments are put into a cumu-

lative file and provide a picture of children's progress in reading and writing over time. Each day, teachers target two or three children to observe, recording their observations in monitoring notebooks. These observations provide information about children's learning styles, attitudes, strengths, and needs. For example, one report reads "Stays with the text if not pushed. Limited fluent words, uses caps and periods appropriately."

### **Strategies from New Zealand**

Independent book tubs, containing books selected to match the children's independent reading level, provide each child a selection from which to choose for reading in class or to take home for reading with parents. The use of book bags, which all children—even the preschoolers—take home every day, is a strategy developed in New Zealand and used throughout the country's schools. Ironically, the strategy found its way into most American classrooms through New Zealand's Reading Recovery Program, an early intervention for first-grade students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

Reading Recovery offers an individualized program that focuses on fostering the child's development of a range of flexible strategies to be used independently when reading books or writing stories. The district has two certified Reading Recovery teachers and one in training who spend 30 minutes a day working with identified children on a one-on-one basis for 12-20 weeks. It has proven to be an effective program, with most children finishing the school year in the median of their class. Contributing to the success of this program is a classroom environment that



supports the child's learning, using teaching methods similar to those used by Reading Recovery.

The Centralized Reading Resource plays a key role in efforts to individualize reading instruction. This library contains some 400 books that have been leveled in a continuum from emergent to early to fluent readers, who have a reading age of 12-14 years. Not only do teachers have a resource that they can draw on to meet the individual needs of all their students, but resource folders that contain ideas on how other teachers have used that particular book are kept with each book. According to Cherry Valley's World Wide Web site (<http://www.digisys.net/cherry>), "there may be an idea of how to innovate the book to make a class-authored traveling book, ideas on art projects, or a photograph of a wall story that has been made using ideas from the book." Staff report that, "One of the major advantages of using a system like this is that, as budgets get smaller, we are able to pool our resources schoolwide, and instead of having duplication of resources in each classroom, we now have books centralized for all to use."

### A Busy Publishing Center

For years, children have been publishing their books, which are displayed in classrooms and the library, as well as traveling home with children to be enjoyed by the whole family. It soon became clear that teachers could not keep up with the volume of books that were ready for publishing. This year an open, multipurpose room serves as a publishing center, complete with several older computers and a couch and rug. Manned by numerous parent and

community volunteers who do some of the typing and all of the binding and laminating, the room is always full of groups of children anxious to see their book become part of the school community. Recently, their work has found a larger audience, due to a number of parents who regularly bring children's published books to Polson's doctors' and dentists' offices. Now, along with copies of *Field and Stream* and parenting magazines, local residents can not only read the latest student works, they can also sign their name and write responses to the books on the comment page.

In addition, children's books can be found in a local nursing facility. This year, both in multiage groups and with their classrooms, children have been visiting a local nursing home and establishing relationships with one or more residents. Children then interview the residents, who frequently tell stories about their lives. Young children may simply remember as much as they can of these stories, while older children take notes. They then write the stories, publish them, and take them back to the nursing home, where they read the stories to the elderly residents. The project has been met with enthusiasm from the staff at the nursing facility and the residents themselves. A social worker at the facility writes:

**NOW, ALONG WITH COPIES OF *FIELD AND STREAM* AND PARENTING MAGAZINES,** local residents can not only read the latest student works, they can also sign their name and write responses to the books on the comment page.

I have witnessed contacts between young and old, which can only be described as "touching." Residents

are able to hold a child's hand or see a bright young smile. They look forward to these visits and are delighted by the children's eagerness to please and entertain. These intergenerational exchanges are a benefit for both age groups. They nurture an understanding and acceptance of age difference.

best learned through actually reading and writing. In part, because worksheets and basals are typically traded for enjoyable stories, whole language has been attacked by some as a "philosophy of osmosis" (Daniels, 1995), a method that is anti-phonics and lacking in academic rigor. A visit to Doug Crosby's classroom would quickly dispel all these myths.

Granted, Crosby's room bears little resemblance to the classrooms in which most adults were educated and where a majority of children still spend most of their primary-school years. Currently dominating the room is a large teepee that provides a place to go "to read and write and get into another dimension."

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### Doug Crosby's Classroom

One of the catalysts of literacy program improvement was the arrival in the 1994-95 school year of Doug Crosby, a native New Zealander who is an experienced primary teacher. A Polson Chamber of Commerce Educator of the Year, Crosby has introduced many strategies that were pioneered in New Zealand, which has one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

There are a number of persistent myths about whole language. The basic premise of whole language is that, just as we learn language through participating in actual conversations, reading and writing are

best learned through actually reading and writing. In part, because worksheets and basals are typically traded for enjoyable stories, whole language has been attacked by some as a "philosophy of osmosis" (Daniels, 1995), a method that is anti-phonics and lacking in academic rigor. A visit to Doug Crosby's classroom would quickly dispel all these myths.

Books, hand puppets, stuffed animals, and examples of children's work are everywhere. Newly painted pictures hang from a clothesline that rings the room; whimsical clay figures wait to be taken by the visiting artist to be fired in a kiln. A colorful library of children's published books and letters from pen pals from New Hampshire are prominently displayed. For a substantial part of the day, children are curled up with books on the well-worn, comfortable sofa and on braided rugs with soft pillows, reading individually and out



loud with friends. Others are listening to tape-recorded books at the listening center. Tables, rather than isolated desks, provide opportunities for cooperative learning. A writing center, complete with paper, pens, crayons, markers, paints, stamp sets, fancy-cut scissors, and glitter, invites children to write and illustrate their stories.

The walls are filled with print. There are calendars, posters, graphs, paintings, and friezes. One large poster in the writing center describes the writing process:

Other posters reflect Cherry Valley's literacy philosophy. A quote from Frank Smith, Professor of Education at the University of Victoria, reminds readers: "In reading, what the brain says to the eye matters more than what the eye says to the brain." Another proclaims:

Literacy is not a 45-minute period of instruction

With behavioral objectives and predictable outcomes.

Literature is enjoying, learning, feeling,

Being, sensing, laughing, crying,  
Hating, deciding, loving, growing,  
Sympathizing, listening.

Literature is all day

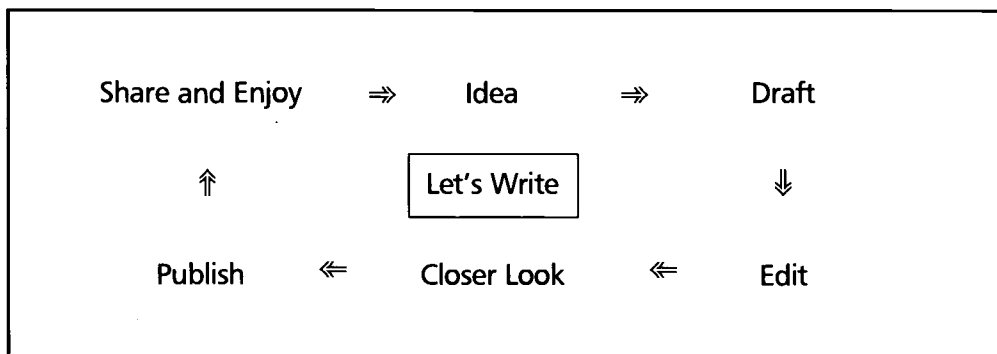
Being and becoming

Growing and growing.

**Reading comprehension.** One of the key features of successful reading-comprehension instruction is a focus on the flexible application of authentic strategies. Teachers at Cherry Valley encourage children to utilize a variety of strategies, including examining the letters to match print to sound (phonics), looking at the first letter of the word and the picture, skipping the word, reading ahead, and finding parts of the word that the reader already knows. Above all, children are encouraged to make sense of what they read. All of these strategies are evident in the shared reading situation described below.

In the hushed quiet of Doug Crosby's room, there is an air of expectancy. Children are sprawled on the braided rug and on the sofa, some holding stuffed animals and puppets. All eyes are on their teacher, who holds a Big Book and is ready to introduce it. Full-page pastel pictures provide visual cues for the simple and predictable text, aiding children's attempts to match print to sound. Crosby begins, "The book we're reading is called *Along Comes Jake* by Joy Cowley. Remember when I'm reading out loud, you're reading up here (pointing to his own head). Lis-

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## GRANTED, CROSBY'S ROOM BEARS LITTLE RESEMBLANCE

to the classrooms in which most adults were educated and where a majority of children still spend most of their primary-school years.

ten carefully because I might have some trouble."

Pointing to the words with a pointer,

Crosby reads the first page, featuring a picture of children digging in a garden: "Ben helps Ann with the \_\_\_\_." Stopping here, Crosby tells the group, "I think I need some help."

"Look at the first letter of the word," suggests Brittany.

"OK, it's a *g*—that's a *gu* sound. Is there anything else that can help me?"

"Look at the picture," offers Mark.

"Oh, is it this thing here?" asks Crosby, pointing at the spade and shovel. "Ann helps Dad with the digging."

"No," comes a chorus of voices.

"You're right, digging doesn't start with a *g*," agrees Crosby. "I guess I was looking at the picture. What's going to help me?" In response to a child's merely shouting out the word "garden," Crosby advises, "just telling me the word won't help me figure it out. OK, we looked at the first letter. What else can we do? But, you're right, when we look at the picture, it looks like a garden." After rereading aloud the sentence, "Ann helps Dad with the garden," Crosby asks, "Does that make sense?" The group agrees that it does. "Would it make sense if we said 'digging?' Yes, but it doesn't look right, does it? Digging starts

with a *d*, not a *g*. And you're right, Amy, there's an *-ing* on the end. We've talked about that before."

While most children are actively engaged in listening for their teachers' miscues and offering suggestions, two children are not paying attention. Crosby invites them to rejoin the group, "Come closer," he suggests quietly. Without missing a beat, he continues on to the next page, a picture of a bathroom with a bathtub full of bubble bath, and confidently reads the entire sentence, "Ben helps Mom with the bubbles."

While the children giggle and shake their heads, Crosby points to the last word again, saying, "That's a long word; I need some help. I looked at the picture and I saw bubbles but that doesn't look right. But there's a way to work it out. Today, we're going to learn a new strategy. Sometimes a long word has another word inside it. If I cover up this part (room), I can see that there are actually two words. That's right, this word is 'bath.' Then if I cover it up, we have—yes, 'room.' Now we put them together and we have 'bathroom.' So remember to look inside the big word and see if you can find the little ones."

And so goes the process of distinguishing bathroom from bubbles, digging from garden, clothes from washing, and chain saws from chopping. Although this type of instruction makes up only a small part of each day, all of the strategies children will need to become successful readers are introduced here. When reading more

complex stories that have a developed story line, children are encouraged to reflect on the plot and the characters. Critical thinking is facilitated by such questions as: "What do you think might happen? What's the problem people have in the story? What else do you know about this topic?"

Crosby is aware that "to some, my room may appear to be disorganized and occupied by a bunch of talkative kids." But years of teaching experience and critical reflection have shaped the philosophy that guides his teaching practices:

I like to think of it as a self-motivated class of engaged learners. My basic teaching philosophies are rather simple, particularly when talking about the language arts field. I begin with the notion that all reading and writing must have a valid purpose. Then, I teach reading by getting the kids to read, and I teach writing by getting the kids to write. With that, you have my program.

**An array of literacy activities.** The school day is made up of an array of opportunities to engage in authentic and intrinsically motivating literacy activities. Each child has an individual plan that enables him or her to prioritize his or her activities each day, ensuring a balance of individual reading, buddy reading (reading with a friend), guided small-group reading, listening to stories (with and without explicit instruction), modeled and draft writing, publishing, and conferencing with the teacher. In addition, every day children sign up on a voluntary basis to read to the class, a practice that the children initiated themselves.






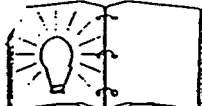
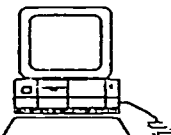

Book bags filled with books chosen by the children go home every night for reading with parents. Parents are encouraged to use a range of flexible strategies to aid comprehension but, above all, the message to parents (highlighted in the *Cherry Valley Literacy News*) is, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading—is reading aloud to children .... Just 15-20 minutes a day spent reading to our child will make the world of difference."

Multiple opportunities for writing, including letters to pen pals, family, and friends; writing stories and publishing books; journal writing; reports; and science observations are provided. When writing first drafts, children are encouraged to use their "developmental spelling." Crosby prefers the term "developmental" to "invented" spelling, because, like learning to talk, learning to write and spell follow predictable developmental stages. Although spelling is primarily learned within the context of writing, the move to standard spelling is facilitated by concentrating on a few spelling words each week. The school targets 230 words, each considered essential for spelling and writing, that all children are expected to know by third grade.

Teachers ensure individual relevance of the spelling words by targeting words from students' draft writing, words that children consistently make close approximations of using their developmental spelling. Through a process of writing and studying the word, covering it and forming a mental image, writing it again and checking for accuracy, children become competent spellers without the drill that often accompanies mastering this skill. Today,

## Today's Plan

Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Read with Mr. C  <input type="radio"/> 	Spelling with Mr. C  <input type="radio"/> 	Conference with Mr. C  <input type="radio"/> 
SQUIRT   <input type="radio"/>	Practice Spelling   <input type="radio"/>	
Draft Writing   <input type="radio"/>	Practice Hand writing  <i>abc</i> <input type="radio"/>	
Publishing  	Choose and read a take home book..   <input type="radio"/>	
Check out new take home book <input type="radio"/>		

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Crosby calls the names of several children who are to receive spelling words. The enthusiasm that they express attests to the success of this method.

Crosby explains that although all children who entered this first-grade class were at an emergent literacy level, currently (near the end of the school year)

children's competence in literacy widely varies. By keeping a running record of children's reading, he is able to tailor learning to individual needs. In this way, Crosby observes, more academically competent children are challenged, and children who may still be at the emergent stage of literacy can gain confidence and



competence by selecting from books at their reading level. In addition, children's own published books can be checked out and taken home. Modeled after books that were sent by their New Hampshire pen pals, these colorfully illustrated, computer-written books include a publishing page, a title page with a dedication, the child's story, an "about the author" section, and a comment page for parents and visitors to use in responding to the book.

While many children write original stories, children who have difficulty coming up with their own ideas are encouraged to retell a traditional story, such as *Thumbelina*, or to create an innovation of a familiar story. For example, one child had written *Red Deer, Red Deer*, a variation of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*. In addition to individually written books, children also create "traveling books," as a group, with each child contributing a page on a shared topic. Crosby compares a traditional worksheet to the traveling book:

Think about a worksheet—it might take 10 or 15 minutes to fill out a worksheet and it will be thrown away or hung on the fridge. Take a traveling book. It might take an hour to make it. Each child might read it with their mom and dad for 10 minutes. It comes back to the classroom, becomes part of the classroom library and is read during the day and, at the end of the year, becomes part of the school library. How many hours of reading and enjoyment is that book giving to kids? (cited in Braunger, 1995).

Parents have expressed to Cherry Valley staff that they are pleased with the

opportunity to see not only their own child making progress, but all of the children developing into competent writers. Authors' parties, in which parents, grandparents, and friends are invited to listen to children read their own individually written and illustrated books, provide multiple opportunities for children to share books with adults. Adults first listen to their own child read, make written comments in the comment section, and then move on to another child. Thus, traveling books and authors' parties are some of the many ways that classrooms include families in Cherry Valley's caring community.

Floppy Rabbit's Journal provides additional opportunities for reading, writing, and nurturing. Each night, Floppy (a stuffed bunny) goes home with a different child, with a reading bag that contains a draft writing book, a journal, and colored pencils in tow. On the first page, "Welcome to Floppy Rabbit's Journal," it is explained to parents that because "Floppy is not too good at writing yet," it is up to the person who takes Floppy home to write about Floppy's adventures at his or her house.

Children first write in their draft writing book, and after a conference with parents to correct spelling and punctuation and to "help it make sense," the adventure is written into Floppy's journal, accompanied by a colored picture. In addition, parents are encouraged to write their own version of Floppy's stay, so children can see that their parents also like to write. Today Floppy has returned from

#### **CROSBY PREFERS THE TERM "DEVELOPMENTAL"**

to "invented" spelling, because, like learning to talk, learning to write and spell follow predictable developmental stages.

Amanda's house, and Amanda reads aloud her own story of Floppy's adventures on his overnight visit, including Floppy's new wardrobe, the yummy meal of pizza and carrots, and his difficulty finding her bedroom in her big house.

### **Skills and Meaning**

And what about skills? Do basic skills suffer when schools move to a more meaning-centered approach to teaching? Although

**AUTHORS' PARTIES, IN WHICH PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS, AND FRIENDS ARE INVITED** to listen to children read their own individually written and illustrated books, provide multiple opportunities for children to share books with adults.

standardized test scores did, in fact, decline slightly for three years while teachers worked on incorporating developmentally appropriate practices into their

teaching repertoire, the 1995 Iowa Test of Basic Skills results showed Cherry Valley students consistently above both individual and school norms in reading, language, mathematics, and overall scores. New scores based on running-record assessments showed that by spring of 1998, 95 percent of fourth-grade children were reading fifth-grade literature and social texts at 90-100 percent accuracy.

Fifty of the 61 children who took the test were reading at the independent level—that is, with 95-100 percent accuracy. And in both social studies and in literature, children self-corrected their own mistakes at a very high rate, demonstrating that they were reading for meaning rather than merely word calling.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers have identified a number of characteristics of successful reading-comprehension programs, including ample time for text reading, direct strategy instruction, and collaboration and discussion (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Cherry Valley's language arts program provides children with an enjoyable and intellectually challenging mixture of all of these approaches. But classrooms at Cherry Valley offer more than a successful reading-comprehension program; the varied literacy activities provide multiple paths to meet the overall goal of the school's literacy program: "To ensure that all children become able readers, writers, speakers, and listeners, and are critical thinkers who can take responsibility for and direct their own lifetime of learning."

## Harborview/Capital Elementary School, Juneau, Alaska: An Active Child in an Active Social Environment

**A**n image of school as a place where children in orderly classrooms sit quietly at their seats engaged in “on task” behavior is deeply entrenched in American educational thinking. However, a visitor to Harborview/Capital Elementary School in Juneau, Alaska, would look in vain for such children. Instead of tidy classrooms, classrooms are exciting, lively places that reveal a substantial tolerance for mess. Colorful, life-size paper-mâché birds—nuthatches, blue herons, horned owls, wood thrushes, ruffed grouse, and peregrine falcons—are perched on tables and clotheslines and hover amidst ocean dioramas, illustrated wall stories, posters, quilts, puppets, and multicultural dolls.

In a kindergarten/first-grade room, more than 100 feet of bright blue string, demonstrating the length of a Portuguese man-of-war’s tentacles, winds around tables and chairs, out the door, and into the hall. Suspended from the ceiling in a multiage kindergarten/first-grade/second-grade classroom is a life-size killer whale. Made of chicken wire, PCP pipe, paper-mâché, and construction paper, the project has taken two years to complete.

Circle areas for group brainstorming, singing, storytelling, and instruction and activity centers, spilling over with elaborate block structures, large floor puzzles, games, and painting and writing projects, offer inviting alternatives to individual desks. While at any given time a number of children are quietly reading and writ-

ing, they are seldom sitting at desks; rather, they are lounging on couches, rugs, or rocking chairs. Children engage in dramatic play, tell stories, sing, care for a variety of plants and animals, paint, listen to taped stories and songs, and, most of all, take part in animated conversation—about a book, a story in progress, an art or science project, or a math problem. For example, in a multiage kindergarten/first-grade/second-grade classroom, two children are discussing endangered species:

“1,000 wouldn’t be enough.”

“Yes, it would,” comes the spirited reply. “Because all the girl cheetahs would have babies and there would be a lot more cheetahs. Then they wouldn’t be endangered anymore.”

“What if the babies don’t make it to full size? Then what would happen?”

Next door, in another blended classroom, two children are discussing their writing assignment.

“What would be better, being in charge of your family or in charge of the world?”

“I’d rather be in charge of my family because then I could make my brother do what I want.”

“But if you were in charge of the world, you *would* be in charge of your family.”

Rather than discouraging such behavior as disruptive and “off task,” at Capital, these conversations are viewed as playing an important role in children’s cognitive and social development. Teachers work collaboratively to provide a socially supportive atmosphere that encourages chil-

dren to share strategies, exchange writings, and challenge each others' thinking.

### **A Shared Philosophy**

Teachers at Capital value the mutual support provided by working collaboratively. The early childhood background of most of the teachers has contributed to the development of a shared educational philosophy and approach to teaching that many schools must work years to achieve. Avid readers and consumers of research, teachers

and wall stories, paint portraits, put on plays, and learn bird calls. Posters throughout the school provide insight into some of Capital's underlying values and beliefs. In a kindergarten classroom, a quote from Piaget expresses a key tenet of Capital's philosophy: "The principal goal of education is to create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done—people who are creative, inventive, and discoverers."

**INSTEAD OF TIDY CLASSROOMS,** classrooms are exciting, lively places that reveal a substantial tolerance for mess.

ers share information, bounce ideas off each other, argue, and support each

other, creating a climate of ongoing professional development. Team teaching enables teachers to share responsibility for planning and engage in research into their own practices.

District support for practices implemented at Capital play an important role in the cohesive picture presented by school staff. District-endorsed "best practices" include: project-based education; multiage classrooms; inclusion; technology across the classroom; conflict resolution; community of learners; standards-based curriculum; site-based decisionmaking; student-centered classrooms; multicultural and multilingual education; student-led conferencing; constructivism; portfolio assessment; teacher research; and systemic reform.

To say that creativity is valued at Capital would be an understatement. Visual arts, music, poetry, and literature are an integral part of the curriculum. Children make masks, paper-mâché animals, quilts, and cooperative murals; they illustrate poems

### **Knowing Where Kids Are, How They Got There, and What to Do Next**

Capital teachers, like all teachers, are concerned with skills as well as in-depth learning. Despite—or perhaps because of—the high value placed on creativity, children are not "just left to play." Measuring children's growth and using a variety of methods to individualize teaching is essential to good teaching. Eight years ago, when Juneau schools moved toward a whole-language approach to literacy and integrated curricular approaches that emphasize understanding over rote learning, primary teachers sought alternatives to the psychometric method of assessment and found few models to turn to. They wanted assessments that would address a broader definition of intelligence than that of standardized tests, encourage children to become reflective and self-directed learners, provide information to individualize instruction, and help parents to see their children's progress.

They wanted a lot, and over the next few years a number of the district's primary teachers worked hard to develop a

language arts portfolio system that would meet all these criteria.

The language arts portfolios developed by Juneau primary teachers are now used in all the district's first- through fifth-grade classrooms and are increasingly used in districts throughout the state. They include a student reflection letter, written teacher narratives, reading and writing samples, a reading attitude survey, observations of speaking and listening, and reading and writing continuums.

The continuums not only chart student performance but also provide guideposts for teaching. "They provide the best training," says Mary Tonkovich, a district librarian. "In developing and using the continuums, some already good teachers have become very excellent teachers by really thinking about the process of learning to read and write" (cited in Caudell, 1996, p. 10). By demonstrating children's growth over time, portfolios avoid the static measure of achievement depicted by a letter grade.

### Early Literacy

Research has demonstrated a positive statistical relationship between the amount of time spent reading (and being read to) and reading comprehension, increases in vocabulary, and concept knowledge (Field-

ing & Pearson, 1994). In turn, the amount of time students *choose* to spend reading is enhanced by a combination of opportunities for social interaction, an abundance of reading materials, and teacher emphasis on free reading (Ng et al., 1996). Teachers at Capital organize their classrooms to enhance not only children's ability to read, but also their intrinsic motivation to do so.

To meet children's individual needs, each child has his or her own book box containing books at the appropriate instructional level. While at first staff used only the books already leveled by the district's Reading



Recovery teachers, they have taught themselves to apply the principles learned in this program to level numerous trade books, including those published by the Wright Group and Scholastic. Every day, children read in homogeneous reading groups, where teachers take advantage of "teachable moments" to conduct quick "mini-lessons" on phonics or punctuation. For quiet reading time and for taking home to read with

**RESEARCH HAS  
DEMONSTRATED A POSITIVE  
STATISTICAL RELATIONSHIP**

between the amount of time  
spent reading (and being read to)  
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concept knowledge.

parents, children choose from book boxes filled with such inviting titles as *Have You Seen My Cat?*, *I Went Walking*, *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*, *Have You Seen My Duckling?*, and *The Chick and the Duckling*.

In 1991, Reading Recovery was introduced in Juneau in a three-year training cycle. Twelve district teachers volunteered to be trained in this method. Although in 1994 a decision was made to invest Title I monies in other programs, the 12 trained teachers continue to work with a number of first-grade children to supplement reading instruction. Teachers feel that the integration of many of the Reading Recovery strategies into daily classroom activities has benefited all children. For example, children are encouraged to develop a number of flexible reading strategies, a principle focus of Reading Recovery. Parents are encouraged to read with their children at home, using some of the same strategies taught at school.

Teachers at Capital are quick to point out that literacy includes storytelling as well as reading. A poster in one classroom reads, "Good stories are a native tradition. Reading is a loving experience." Legends are used extensively and offer an enjoyable way to integrate oral and written language with art and multicultural awareness. As a group, children listen to the story, tell it back, write it down, and finally illustrate it. Recently, children in a number of classrooms read "Gluscobi and the Wind Eagle," an Abenai Indian legend found in

*Keepers of the Earth*, written by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Several renditions of the legend, colorfully illustrated on numerous pieces of large easel paper, wind around classroom walls and hallways.

Such projects provide opportunities for children to work together, enhancing collaboration, oral language, recall, writing, cultural awareness, and, of course, artistic expression. "Legends are also a wonderful way to teach environmental education," notes Mimi Walker, who draws from her childhood experiences in southeast Alaska and her degree in fine arts to integrate art, music, poetry, science, math, social studies, geography, and literature into exciting and unpredictable classroom experiences.

### **Mimi Walker's Classroom**

In Walker's classroom, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci are not just Ninja turtles; they are objects of indepth studies by the entire class. Children's artwork covers the walls, inside and outside the classroom, including children's renditions of the *Mona Lisa* and portraits of Matisse and van Gogh. To achieve the effect of a "real" portrait, Walker introduced a technique described in Betty Edwards' best seller, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*: Children take a line drawing of an original painting and, turning it upside down, they then carefully copy what they *see* (with special attention to negative space), rather than what they *know* to be there. The portraits, which are devoid of stereotypic renderings of eyes, nose, and mouth, bear a striking resemblance to the original paintings and are easily recognizable.

Walker also uses her training in educational approaches popular in Reggio Emilia



(a town in Northern Italy renowned for its innovative schools) to help children expand their artistic awareness and develop techniques not typically used by such young children. For example, for Mother's Day the children created portraits of themselves and their mothers after studying the life and work of American Impressionist Mary Cassatt, an artist who is well-known for her mother-and-child portraits. "Kids need to understand and grab hold of something," says Walker. "To make her real, we talked about her life, about how she never had children but painted beautiful portraits of mothers and children. The kids really get the connection; they'll say, 'She must have really loved children.'"

While Walker enjoys the ubiquitous stick figures that are the hallmark of five- and six-year-old children, for this project she wanted them to capture the softness and feeling of a Cassatt painting. Employing a Reggio Emilia technique, she projected a slide of one of Cassatt's paintings through a clear easel; the children then traced the outline of mother and child onto their blank paper on the other side of the easel. Using oil pastels, children added features and other details to individualize their portraits. The results surpassed even Walker's expectations and were a definite hit with parents.

Today, children are noisily returning from recess, gradually settling down on the circle rug to sing a heartfelt version of *The Titanic*, led by a student who points to the words as they sing. The activity combines music, history, reading, and a dash of social commentary, as the children sing the familiar tale of how women and little children lost their lives and the lesser-known fact that the poor died at a disproportionate rate to the rich. (While only

one child died of the 30 children in first and second class, in steerage 53 of the 76 children—70 percent—drowned):

When the iceberg hit the bow  
They were off of England's shore  
But the rich refused to associate  
with the poor  
So they put them down below  
Where they'd be the first to go  
It was sad when the great ship  
went down.

Still seated at circle, the children's attention turns to the two children whose turn it is to present their previously written bird research reports. Accompanied by their newly crafted, life-size paper-mâché versions of a great blue heron and a bald eagle, each student tells the class why he picked this particular bird to study, what he wanted to learn, and what he found out, including the habitat and size. After taking comments from the group, the reports finish with a math problem. The transition to small-group math and science activities goes without a hitch as the children wind up circle time by jointly solving the ambitious problem, "How many toes on 100 bald eagles?"

"Theme is the key idea," notes Walker. I interweave themes into everything. It makes it easy for me to teach. I don't like little pieces. We have a lot of diversity here, and themes make it easy to teach about other cultures. From history, we can spring off science themes that are really important." And, of course, everything is connected through art and music. For example, the song about the Titanic is part of a

**TEACHERS AT CAPITAL ARE QUICK TO POINT OUT** that literacy includes storytelling as well as reading.

study of the history of ship wrecks in Juneau, which is studied by all first-grade children. Children study this history through books, photographs, and field trips to the city museum. "An important part of that history," continues Walker, "is the fact that

there were no regulations about how many life boats and life jackets should be on ships until early in this century. Singing about the Titanic helps them understand why these regulations came about."

But while poetry, song, and visual arts provide the "glue" that holds the projects together, other hands-on activities are also important. In a unit

on bears, children studied the three kinds of bears (brown, black, and polar) in Alaska by exploring bear skins, skulls, teeth, and claws, donated by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. They honed their mapping skills and knowledge of Alaska by mapping where these bears live. Making bears out of clay helped children to pay close attention to the shape and color of bears, and they were able to identify each others' bears by distinguishing characteristics. For example, one student observed, "This is a black bear but it is brown in color. If it were a brown bear, it would have a hump."

Families were included in the project through the class newsletter and with a

homework assignment that asked each child to write down her family's favorite true bear story, which was shared with the class. And, of course, the project included a study of what bears eat—the children studied the coho salmon's life cycle, learned about its anatomical structure though examining a real salmon, and then painted the fish and made prints. Finally, an Alaska Native from the community supplied a recipe for brine, which the children made, and they smoked a salmon in a smoker provided by the Indian Studies Program.

To culminate the unit on bears, the students studied the Iroquois legend "The Boy Who Was Raised by Bears." After learning the words from a tape of an authentic Native American song provided by Walker's sister, creating masks from casting material, and improvising a Native American dance, the children brought the legend to life in a dramatic production performed for families and classmates.

In Capital's family-like atmosphere, both individuality and community are valued. While staff have created a tight-knit community, classrooms are as individualized as the teachers themselves. In Debbie Fagnant's classroom, interactions between children and between staff and children reflect the high value placed on following children's lead and cooperative learning.

### **Debbie Fagnant's Classroom**

It's language arts time in Fagnant's classroom, where a workshop atmosphere prevails. Children are reading—some individually and some with a friend, writing stories and reports, and making birds for their bird research project. "Can you help me, Megan?" asks Anna, "I can't get my eye on my bird. It's a little too close to the



beak." While the two girls put the finishing touches on the hummingbird, Fagnant helps individual children with reading and writing strategies. Listening sympathetically to a plea for help from Katie, who is suffering from writer's block, Fagnant turns to Katie's friend and asks, "Would you listen to Katie's story? She's solved two problems and needs help with another one." A few minutes later, Katie comes back smiling,

"I did it myself after I read it out loud to Sara and she said it was a good idea," Katie says.

"Often, that's all you need to do," agrees their teacher.

Turning her attention to a child who has completed a first draft of his story about a field trip, Fagnant listens carefully and uses open-ended questions to encourage further writing: "Was there anything else you thought was important? Why do you think that was? Did it feel safe? Why do you think they built it underground? How do you know?"

To a child whose story is ready for a final edit before it is typed on the computer, Fagnant comments, "You know, this is really a wonderful story. Are you ready to look at some spelling here, ready to put punctuation in?" Taking a strip of paper, she writes the word "window" and explains, "You got all the letters except w. I'll bet you knew what sound was missing."

Such individualized attention is a crucial part of Fagnant's blended classroom, which spans ages five through eight, but with a much greater developmental range. Attempting to get all of the children at the same place at the same time would be a futile task, and Fagnant utilizes a number

of strategies to assure that each child's needs for assistance, encouragement, and challenge are met. Key to her success is the encouragement of cooperative learning, illustrated by Katie's and Anna's problem-solving strategies described previously. Children listen to each other, brainstorm in small and large groups, read together, and help and encourage each other in individual and joint activities. Title I assistants and vol-

unteers—including parents, "foster grandparents," university practicum students, and peer tutors—provide added support for children who are struggling with mastering basic reading and writing skills.

An important aspect of the literacy program is the daily read-aloud time. Today, the children listen attentively to the first chapter of *Ramona the Pest*. Although the children take some time to settle into their comfortable positions on the circle rug, sofa, or table, there are no reminders to be quiet from Fagnant, who capitalizes on their enjoyment of the story to draw the children into the activity. Paying close attention to the group, she uses occasional questions to hold their attention: "Have you ever been called a pest? Can you imagine what it's like when Ramona makes a 'great big noisy fuss'?" "What does it mean to sit for the present?" Although several times attention is called to spelling and punctuation, the primary

### **'THEME IS THE KEY IDEA.**

**I INTERWEAVE THEMES** into everything. It makes it easy for me to teach. I don't like little pieces. We have a lot of diversity here and themes make it easy to teach about other cultures. From history, we can spring off science themes that are really important."

purpose of this reading period is enjoyment of stories.

### **Reading and writing strategies.**

Despite an emphasis on individualizing learning experiences and a willingness to follow the children's lead, Fagnant's literacy program is anything but haphazard. The incorporation of Reading Recovery strategies has helped to provide structure to an underlying whole-language approach. "We don't just give them a book and say read it," assures Fagnant. Running records are used to identify books that children can read with 90-94 percent accuracy, and a centralized building library ensures that children have access to a wide variety of inviting books.

And yes, even spelling is attended to, although children are encouraged to use developmental spelling for first drafts of papers. Fagnant uses a modified version

of "Phonics Base," which includes basic phonics structures to test children's understanding and use of phonics to spell words. "You can tell where the holes are, if they need help with *sh* or *ing*, and I target that," she says. A high-frequency word list of 1,200 words is also used to identify words for children to take home and practice with parents. Fagnant explains:

How could you *not* individualize, when some children have learned 30 words and some 600? It's my job to know through assessment where kids are skill-wise and to support building the skills they're ready to learn. I taught from a basal for six years and I know that phonics is important. The whole-language movement has stressed reading for meaning and the development of strategies. We need to find a balance in our reading programs. We

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owe it to kids to give them tools, and some of those tools are skills. The children are flourishing with this approach; they are much stronger readers, much earlier.

### **Conclusion**

Most of our nation's classrooms are set up to address the development of logical/mathematical and verbal knowledge, with particular emphasis on the written word. However, at Capital, children's social, emotional, and esthetic development is given equal attention. The Vygotskian theory that an active child and an active social environment collaborate to produce developmental change (Berk & Winsler, 1995) is put into practice here. While in many

schools interactions among children—laughing and talking—are considered “off-task behavior,” at Capital, such conversations play an important part in children's social and intellectual development. Research has demonstrated what many primary school teachers have long known: Young children learn best in a socially supportive atmosphere that allows them to talk, discuss, exchange writings and points of view, share ideas, negotiate, and argue (Ng et al., 1996).

*The Harborview/Capital Elementary School closed in the fall of 1996 due to the age of the building. Mimi Walker and Debbie Fagnant are currently teaching in the Juneau School District.*

## Mary Harrison Primary School, Toledo, Oregon: People Support What They Create

**I**t's Red Ribbon week at Mary Harrison Primary School. Since the beginning of school, children have learned about friendship, communication, and conflict resolution. At class circle and early morning assemblies, children have observed skits and sung songs about these important competencies. School rules—*play safely, solve problems, include everyone, respect each other, and fun for everyone*—have been discussed, sung, written, and illustrated. In groups, in the library, in buddy reading, and at independent reading time, children in all 10 of Mary Harrison's classrooms have read John Losne's story about a red ribbon and how it pulled a community together. And this week, excitement has built as staff and children have prepared for the march around the school wearing their multicolored, beaded friendship necklaces, with a huge red ribbon pulling them together.

First, both parents and children sorted thousands of colored beads into bags of single-colored beads. At assembly, the idea of "compliment necklaces" was introduced. An orca puppet (Mary Harrison is just seven miles from the Pacific Ocean) visited each classroom with the single-colored beads, presenting a bag of beads as a gift to each child. Then, each time children exchanged a compliment, they also exchanged a bead. Now the multicolored necklaces reflect the many compliments exchanged, and the children are ready for the march and the book picnic that will follow.

Giggling quietly, the children march slowly out of Sue McVeigh's classroom holding their red ribbon. As they wind down the hall, picking up one classroom after another, their voices grow louder. Just past the office, teacher Karen Johnson begins the school chant, and 250 "inside voices" become a deafening roar:

We are the orcas, the mighty,  
mighty orcas,  
Everywhere we go, people  
want to know  
who we are  
So we tell them

**We ARE the Mary Harrison  
ORCAS!**

Around the track the chanting continues, the crescendo gradually subsiding as the children reenter the school and head for the gym for a brief friendship assembly of a story and songs: "We are a circle like the earth, like the sun and the moon above, a circle of friends and family, a wide, warm circle of love"; "A friend is someone who likes you, a friend is someone who cares, a friend is someone who listens, a friend is someone who shares." Visibly calmer now, the children turn their attention to their classmate Tai Lai, who reads from her journal, accompanied by two friends:

Dear Journal,

This is red ribbon week. I'm going to make a necklace with beads. I get a color of beads and my friend has a color. And then I give a compliment to her. When I give her a compliment I'll give her a bead. And she'll give me a compliment and we'll trade beads.



But it doesn't matter about the beads, it matters about the friendship.

### Share, Care, and Grow

Activities that combine literacy and caring are integral to the curriculum at Mary Harrison. Because Lincoln County, in which the town of Toledo is located, ranks high on many indicators of risk to children and families, staff at Mary Harrison feel that their first responsibility is to provide a nurturing environment where children can learn. The school mission statement, "Share, care, and grow," succinctly sums up the school's philosophy. All staff members are encouraged to focus on building a positive school climate by actively examining day-to-day interactions with children.

Principal Barbara Fields notes, "Every single adult is responsible for building on the positive—in the hallways, the bathrooms, the playground." A teacher in a first- and second-grade blended classroom adds, "There may be

some place where the expression 'Do as I say, not as I do' is effective advice, but school is not the place. We constantly ask, 'How do we talk to kids?' 'How do we interact with kids?' 'What behaviors are we modeling?'" A poster in the staff lunch room reminds all staff: "Your greatest contribution to humankind is to be sure

you are a teacher who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows, and feels like a real human being.

**A shared vision.** In Fields' office a poster reads: "People support what they create." With an emphasis on keeping communication open, building on strengths, emphasizing the "positives," and practicing problem solving, Fields has worked with staff to enhance team building and a sense of shared ownership for all aspects of the school in her five years at Mary Harrison. Teaching assistants, both district provided and Title I funded, are actively involved in classrooms, facilitating literacy groups and working with individual children who may need extra support.



Strengthened by experience, action research, and through intensive study of relevant literature, the original "core beliefs," developed in the beginning of the school's move toward developmentally appropriate practices, still reflect Mary Harrison's educational philosophy. Based on the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky,

school practices encourage active learning in meaningful activities. Brain-based research and Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences, in particular, have further influenced their thinking on teaching and learning. Staff at Mary Harrison have worked for years to provide an integrated approach to curriculum, emphasizing projects and themes that help children see the connections across disciplines. Last year, an artist-in-the-school grant—"teachers as artists and artists as teachers"—brought local artists into the school to teach both children and teachers new skills and understandings about traditional Brazilian dance and culture, making pottery, and creating cooperative murals.

The ease with which music is integrated into classroom activities reflects the early childhood background of many of Mary Harrison's teachers. Soft music—Peer Gent Suite, Native American flute music, African vocal harmony, and music from the Shaker religion—plays in the background of many classrooms, as children explore the inviting activity centers or read quietly with a friend. Classes read poetry individually and in groups, and singing together is a frequent activity that eases transitions between activities, enhances class solidarity, and provides nonthreatening opportunities for rhyming and rhythm, important activities for developing phonemic awareness.

### **Making Connections**

Families are included and informed through a variety of informal activities and newsletters. In addition, a family advocate helps children build social skills and self-esteem and helps bridge home and school with a variety of family support services. Weekly

classroom newsletters describe class activities, provide the words to recently learned songs, share recipes, and offer examples of children's work and suggestions for activities at home. Informal occasions such as potlucks, picnics, and fairs bring whole families to school for social activities. Monthly informational coffees are held for parents, both in the morning and in the evening to accommodate differing schedules.

Several times a year, parents are invited to attend family nights. Originally intended to provide parent education, these evening meetings changed quickly to "fun" nights when it was discovered that few parents were tempted by such titles as "Welcome to the Blended Classroom" or "Literacy Night." While education is still a theme, parents are invited to come and enjoy the children's artwork and other activities, and "Literacy Night" has been changed to "Fun with Reading Night." During one family night, families used different textures and shades of colors to create a community mosaic—a huge orca whale—which was then hung in the hall.

**An integrated curriculum.** Both school-wide and classroom themes help children make connections between disciplines and between their own experience and what they learn at school. Themes such as community, wellness, and life cycles help provide a broad conceptual base, without becoming a "wall around the curriculum" (Rosegrant & Bredekamp, 1992). With the Oregon coast only seven miles away, the ocean is a frequent object of study; children read and write about ocean animals and their habitats, visit the nearby aquarium, and enhance their understanding of

ecological systems. Last year, as part of a year-long focus on change and life cycles, children raised salmon eggs and released the fry into nearby streams, incubated duck eggs and watched the eight ducks emerge from their shells, made a sundial to check the path of the sun across the sky throughout the school year, created ocean habitat boxes, and served as bee tour guides for their resident bee colony, donated and maintained by a local bee farmer.

Literacy is an integral part of these projects, as children make written and oral reports and use the experiences as springboards for creative writing. For example, a study of the ocean included reading books about ocean animals, learning songs about the sea, and writing reports, poems, and stories about sea animals. A strong focus on ecology is evident in the illustrated poems and stories that cover the walls and spill out into the hall. Bio-poems next to ocean dioramas invite the reader to guess what creature is being described. One reads:

I go through the sea like a butterfly  
My shell grows when things come  
down to me  
My home is in the sea  
with all the creatures  
I grab creatures with my pincers  
I am a hermit crab.

Creating group poems is one of the many ways that teachers encourage collaborative learning. To help children become comfortable with writing poetry, music and poetry are interwoven into classroom activities. Karen Johnson, a first- and second-grade teacher, encourages children to start their writing with nonrhyming poems, such as

the previous one, and with topics that children know well. A group-created poem about art surpassed even Johnson's expectations. It begins "I LOVE ART. Art is your imagination. It is expressing feelings. It is COLORS." An "earth rap" (see the following sidebar), written and illustrated collaboratively by the whole class, provided an introduction to rhyming and shows Mary Harrison's strong emphasis on conservation and respect for the earth.

First- and second-grade blended classroom teacher Janay Kneeland notes that respect for the earth and an understanding of the interdependence of all living things is a natural outgrowth of respect for each other and for all people. In her classroom, the visual arts play an integral part in developing environmental themes. Last year, children read *Dear Children of the Earth: A Letter from Home*, a story by Schim Schimmel, in which the earth talks to children. Children wrote and illustrated individual

letters back to the earth, describing how they felt they needed to take responsibility for caring for their planet. In a final project, children created T-shirts with illustrated environmental messages, after first making a written design.

Incubating duck eggs combines scientific rigor, literacy, and nurturing. Of course, children read stories about ducks: *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Puddles*, and *Have You Seen My Duckling?* While the eggs are incubating, children keep a daily book



about what is happening inside the eggs. "Candling the eggs is always a source of excitement," Kneeland says. "They say, 'Wow, what's that burrowing around in there? Look, it's moving; I see veins!' The ducklings imprint on me because I'm the first thing they see and hear. Kids love to see the ducklings follow me outside and swim in the small swimming pool inside the classroom. They learn responsibility by feeding and watering them twice a day and cleaning their cage. It's amazing how kids who can be careless with each other can be so tender with a little duckling."

**Give it a go.** Whole-language approaches, emphasizing the learning of phonics, punctuation, and spelling in the context of actually reading and writing, have been used for years at Mary Harrison. Children read individually and together—lying down, curled up in rocking chairs, and in the housekeeping corner. Children read to their peers, help each other with words, and practice choral reading with a partner, a strategy that children initiated which has proved to be "a great way to build self-confidence" for less competent readers. Every day, teachers read the entire class such stories as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Ramona the Pest*, and books from the *Little House* series.

Strategies developed in New Zealand and introduced through the Reading Recovery program—leveling of books, independent book tubs, guided and independent reading and writing, running records for assessment of emergent literacy, and literacy groups—have gradually been added to most classrooms and have enriched and systematized the literacy curriculum. Although basals are still utilized, they are

Earth is earth. Oh earth is earth.  
She is the one who gives us birth.

Earth is our home. It's the only one we got.  
It's getting real trashed up, and don't say  
it's not.

We can help the earth. We can start a new day.  
So let's get together and have it this way.

Trees and forests disappear into sand.  
And if we don't do something, it will ruin  
all the land.

Animals grow. Animals die.  
If we work together, we can clear the sky.

So stop your littering. Reduce your trash.  
Or our beautiful planet will start to crash.

If you help today, and you help tomorrow.  
Then we'll clear the trash that made this  
sorrow.

Recycle, reduce, reuse, and close the lid.  
Because all this trash is stuff we did!

Earth is earth. Oh earth is earth.  
She is the one who gives us birth.

Creating group poems is one of the many ways that teachers encourage collaborative learning.

used flexibly as part of a curriculum that includes a wide variety of trade books. A poster with a quote from Don Holdaway, the New Zealand educator responsible for developing shared book experience, reads:

There is no scientifically ratified sequence of skills in literacy development. Every program uses a different sequence and this is determined by opinion rather than sci-

ence. A truly developmental sequence is one displayed in the behavior and characteristics of the pupil. When basal scope and sequence charts are presented as "developmental," this is a misuse of the term.

Reading, writing, and spelling are seen as developing "hand in hand." Mary Harrison's philosophy statement on writing reads:

We can use the natural interest that children have in writing by encouraging their beginning steps, providing guidance and practice, and knowing when and how to move them along the road of continual improvement. By understanding the basic developmental nature of written expression we can make children see writing as an enjoyable and purposeful process. The foundation we

lay in the early primary years is an important step toward the benchmarks and state Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) outcomes.

"Give it a go," is heard frequently in classrooms, as teachers encourage children to write often and to check spelling after their thoughts are on paper. Staff have found that frequent writing helps develop fluency and self-confidence.

"I guessed and goed and I got it right!" exclaimed one young writer in a multiage classroom. The atmosphere of encouraging risk taking goes hand-in-hand with a strong underlying structure. Children are expected to use all the writing modes defined by the state's writing process standards—narrative, imaginative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive—and





reflect on their own writing samples, which are then included in portfolios.

### **Children Who May Need “Something Extra”**

A number of services are available for children who may be struggling academically. A schoolwide Title I school, Mary Harrison has the services of three part-time Title I assistants and a Title I coordinator. Because individual children no longer have to meet income qualifications to enjoy the services of Title I teachers, teachers have more flexibility in planning their curriculum and can group children heterogeneously, a practice that fosters inclusion and cooperative learning. Although the effective Reading Recovery program has been dropped due to funding cuts, Sue McVeigh, the former Title I coordinator, and Nancy Boyer, the current coordinator, have trained teaching assistants to facilitate literacy groups. In these interactive groups, children engage in shared or guided reading, and teachers use many Reading Recovery strategies. “We needed to work with more than one child at a time, so we formulated literacy groups,” explains McVeigh. She continues:

There was such excitement among staff and children, it just grew. Often we start with having each child write down the words they know. We [teachers] write too. We point to each word as we read it. If they can write it, they can read it, and vice versa. If I know that a word—say “hat”—is coming up in our book, we write a lot of -at words. We talk about what is the same in each word. Then we open the book. One of the words they know is in the book. So they

have a hook on this book—there is something known and it builds their confidence.

### **Charting Children’s Progress**

To monitor the progress of each child, in addition to portfolios teachers use the six writing traits described by Vickie Spandel in *Seeing with New Eyes*: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Running records provide a detailed picture of children’s reading strategies and proficiency, and literacy bands from *The English Profiles Handbook* are used to chart children’s progress in spoken language, reading, and writing. For example, a beginning reader holds a book the correct way, turns pages from the front to the back, refers to letters by name, identifies known familiar words in other contexts, and responds to literature by listening intently and joining in familiar stories. Although there is a strong emphasis on authentic assessment that reflects the child’s performance during typical activities, the need to show progress toward the new state benchmarks has resulted in a twice-a-year writing prompt, in which children respond, without assistance, to the following directions:

Each child will choose a sea shell from a collection. They will respond to the following prompts: Describe this shell in detail. What does it smell like? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it sound like?

The responses are assessed according to a continuum based on the writing traits, and teachers pick one goal to work on, based on the assessment. Although the



state has as yet provided few guidelines for benchmarks in the primary grades, staff at Mary Harrison are working with a number of other elementary schools in the area to create developmental continuums for reading, writing, and math, "assessments that will show that children are moving toward the target." These assessments will be field-tested in the participating schools and may then be available for schools across the state. Fields explains:

It is our responsibility to come up with something that does show growth and that is developmentally appropriate. If we don't do it, someone will do it *to* us. And this project will give us the opportunity to meet with other schools, share resources

and ideas. We have to get beyond being immobilized and move forward to meet the challenge.

### **Conclusion**

Elliot Eisner (1991) has defined literacy as "the ability to encode or decode meaning in any forms used in the culture to represent meaning." At Mary Harrison, this broad definition of literacy guides teaching and learning. The curriculum is illustrated, sung, studied, reflected upon, discussed, practiced, modeled, and, above all, integrated into the everyday lives of staff and children. As Eisner (1991) points out, schools are not preparation for life, they *are* life.

## Handout 1

# Thirteen Core Understandings About Learning to Read

### Reading as Language

1. Reading is a construction of meaning from written text. It is an active, cognitive, and affective process.
2. Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.
3. Social interaction is essential in learning to read.
4. Reading and writing develop together.

### Reading as Learning

5. Reading involves complex thinking.
6. Environments rich in literacy experiences, resources, and models facilitate reading development.
7. Engagement in the reading task is key in successfully learning to read.

8. Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings.
9. Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, and demonstrations.
10. Children learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading.
11. Children learn best when teachers employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills.
12. Children need the opportunity to read, read, read.
13. Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success.

Source: Braunger, J., & Lewis, J.P. (1997). *Building a knowledge base in reading*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English; & Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

## Highlights of Research on Learning to Talk

*Word meanings are the consequences in baby of what mother and baby feel and express (Dore, 1985).*

■ Researchers agree that the *development of language is the most important milestone in children's cognitive development* (Bruner, 1983).

■ The most influential theory of language acquisition is known as the "interactionist" theory. Its basic premise is that at birth, *infants are psychologically prepared to talk and learn to do so in the context of reciprocal, social interactions with caregivers* (Bruner, 1983).

■ Research is now verifying what mothers and fathers have always known: From birth, the infant is profoundly social. *Infants are biologically primed to respond to the human voice, its rhythms and melody* (Stern, 1977).

■ Because *oral language is regarded as the cornerstone of reading development*, literacy is viewed as beginning in caregiver/infant interactions. The warm, responsive care—touching, holding, talking, smiling, singing—that is essential for emotional development is also crucial for cognitive and language development.

■ These early interactions don't just create a context for early development and learning, they directly affect the way the brain is wired. New research shows *that much of the wiring of the brain's neurons comes after birth and depends on experience* (Shore, 1997).

■ *Emotional signals, such as crying and smiling serve as the language of the baby.*

Babies whose mothers are responsive to crying during the early months tend to cry less in the last months of the first year. Instead, they rely more on facial expressions, gesture, and vocalization to communicate their intentions and wishes to mother (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972).

■ *Language development begins with mutual eye contact and reciprocal smiling.* During these early caregiver/child interactions, social routines are first established and the basic rules of human interaction are learned (Bruner, 1983).

■ *Baby's first words have a long history.* Before infants utter their first words toward the end of the first year, they have developed a number of competencies. Before meaningful speech, infants can:

- Secure the attention of another through gesturing or pointing
- Sustain joint attention
- Take conversational turns
- Engage in goal-directed action, such as purposefully dropping a toy in a bath to create a splash
- Produce simple syllables, known as babbling
- Understand the meaning of many words, perhaps as many as 100

■ The optimal environment for stimulating oral language development is one of *responsiveness* to and acceptance of the child's communicative attempts. Communication between families and child-care providers regarding children's new words and particular pronunciations can help everyone understand and expand on children's communicative attempts.

## Handout 2b

### Caregiver Checklist for Infants and Toddlers

Does the caregiver:

1. Engage in many face-to-face, one-to-one interactions?
2. Attend to all babies' efforts to communicate and respond to their needs?
3. Observe nonverbal gestures of infants, and give meaning to them?
4. Recognize the importance of nonverbal communication in language development and use it with infants and toddlers?
5. Present many opportunities for language to occur by providing interesting toys or activities?
6. Label everyday objects, events, and occurrences for infants and toddlers?
7. Talk to infants and toddlers about what is being done?
8. Talk to infants and toddlers about activities that they are involved in?
9. Check the infant's and toddler's understanding (e.g., "Where is your bottle?" "Can you bring me the train?")?
10. Expand on a toddler's utterance by adding one or two words or completing a sentence?
11. Vary tone of voice?
12. Prevent "tuning out" by limiting noise?
13. Use picture books with children?

Source: Shimoni, R., Baxter, J., & Kugelmass, J. (1992). *Every child is special: Quality group care for infants and toddlers*, New York, NY: Addison-Wesley. Reprinted with permission.

## Handout 3

# The Optimal Environment for Stimulating Language Development

George Miller (cited in Bruner, 1983) estimated that infants must add words to their vocabulary at an average rate of one every hour they are awake, a total of several thousand a year. Children learn grammar with a complexity which defies linguistic analysis (Smith, 1983). How do children manage such a theoretical impossibility? The optimal environment for stimulating language development is one of responsiveness to and acceptance of the child's communicative attempts. By responding to infants' babbles, coos, and smiles as if they are meaningful and including children in conversations long before they say their first words, caregivers help children become confident and competent language learners. An optimal environment is provided by caregivers who:

- Accept and value behavior that children are able to do
- Are highly responsive to children's interests
- Provide opportunities for children to exercise control over activities
- Provide activities and interactions that are developmentally appropriate (Snow et al., 1982)

■ Interpret children's communicative attempts as meaningful, expand on their utterances, and attempt to engage them in further conversation:

Child: Mommy sock?

Adult: Yes, that's Mommy's sock. I'll put it in my drawer. What would you like to play with now?

Such frequent, brief, and encouraging incidental teaching relative to a child-chosen topic provides the feedback necessary for children to learn language in a way that supports learning. In contrast, caregivers may discourage the child's use of language by frequent negative interactions that serve to prohibit children's activities. In a longitudinal study Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) found that:

- There is a strong relationship between the prevalence of prohibitions in the first years of life and lowered child accomplishments, lasting still at age nine.
- Children share the prevailing tone—whether it is positive or negative—of family interactions. When the feedback of caregivers to children is predominantly negative, the feedback of children to family members is negative, and vice versa.
- It is not only the *quality* of the language-learning environment that influences differences in children's verbal and cognitive functioning. Differences in the *amount* of verbal interaction between caregivers and their children are strongly correlated with differences in vocabulary growth, vocabulary use, and IQ test scores.

## Handout 4a

# Learning to Read and Write—The Early Years

■ Encouraging children's early attempts at reading and writing helps children develop confidence in these abilities. Like oral language, *written language is best learned through actual use in a social context*. The optimal environment for young children to learn about written language is one where children can (Kontos, 1986, p. 58):

- See and hear adults read, write, and converse in their daily lives
- Read, write, speak, and listen in spontaneous situations meaningful to the child, with adults and older children
- Engage in print-related activities during play, such as (pretend) reading and writing

■ The single most important parental activity for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.

■ There are many paths to literacy. Conversations, singing, poetry, pretend play, pictures, storytelling, story dramatization, a print-rich environment, and reading stories all lead a child into literacy.

- *Singing* boosts early language skills (including phonemic awareness), enhances memory and listening skills, and increases attention span.
- *Dramatic play* enhances memory, social competence, and language skills. Pretend play, in which children make up increasingly complex stories and act them out, leads children into storytelling, writing, and reading.

- Opportunities for *listening to and telling stories* enhance children's confidence and competence in reading and writing.

■ Engel suggest three kinds of experiences that promote storytelling during the early years (1996/97, p. 8):

- Having conversations, plenty of them, and long ones, with adults
- Talking about the past and the future, even before your child can do this on his or her own
- Hearing and participating in stories of all kinds

■ Dramatizing stories can help link children's love of pretend play to more formal storytelling. Children can act out storybooks, songs, poetry, and their own dictated stories.

## Benefits of reading stories

Pretend play, storytelling, and story acting are all enriched by stories written by adults. Reading and listening to stories build vocabulary; enhance memory, imagination, and listening skills; help children think in more complex, abstract, and creative ways; broaden children's range of experience; and help children develop phonemic awareness through rhythm and rhyme. Sharing stories with very young children helps build both physical and emotional closeness, and lays the foundation for a lifelong love of reading (Barclay, Benelli, & Curtis, 1995; Gottschall, 1995).

■ Researchers agree that it is never too early to start reading to children.

- **Infants** love bright, colorful pictures and the melodic sound of the reader's voice.



## Handout 4b

- **Toddlers** enjoy the rhythmical language of nursery rhymes and other poetry, and the repetitive language of short, predictable books. They often carry books around with them and want to hear the same book repeatedly. It is important to allow toddlers to reach, grasp, touch, and point at the pictures while reading.
- **Preschoolers** still enjoy many of the books they heard as toddlers and are often ready to hear more complex stories that require a longer attention span and attentive listening. *Repeated readings* of favorite stories is still important; children may teach themselves to read by pretending to read memorized books. *Open-ended questions* encourage children to think critically about the story—imagining, empathizing, and questioning. Encouraging children to *read along and supply some of the words*, such as the word “hill” in “Jack and Jill went up the hill,” builds listening skills, memory, and attention span.

■ When children who have had extensive experience with storybook reading enter school, they have learned:

1. **How books work:** Books printed in English are read from front to back, left to right, and top to bottom.
2. **Print should make sense:** The discovery that words are placed together in meaningful ways is fundamental to learning to read.
3. **Print and speech are related in a specific way:** Storybooks provide many different samples of print for children to practice matching speech to print.

Book language differs from speech: “Written language, unlike oral language, must carry the total load of meaning without ambiguity. It is more formal, more complete, and more textured than spoken language ....” (Holdaway, 1979, p. 54).

4. **Books are enjoyable:** Positive feelings toward reading help children read often and for pleasure, persevering even when frustrated by a difficult text.

5. **Patterns of interacting characteristic of behaviors expected in a school setting:** Children gain confidence and competence when they can relate their knowledge to the school setting (Schickedanz, 1986).

■ In *Beginning to Read: Thinking and learning in Print* (1990), Marilyn Adams estimates that the typical middle-class child enters first grade with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading, while the corresponding child from a low-income family averages 25 such hours. “Is there any chance,” she asks, “that the first-grade teacher can make up for that difference in 360 hours of one-on-twenty instruction?”

■ High-quality child care can provide an enriched environment that enhances children’s literacy development and positive self-image. Through many opportunities for children to engage in *conversations, singing, pretend play, storytelling, story acting, and to listen to books, stories, and poetry*, children become confident and competent readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.

## Handout 5a     **Singing and Poetry**

**R**esearch in how oral language develops has greatly influenced our understanding of how children learn written language. Because oral language is regarded as the cornerstone of reading development, literacy is now viewed as beginning in caregiver/infant interactions. Oral and written language are seen as interrelated and developing simultaneously, each reinforcing and transforming the other. In this view, the underlying process of learning written and oral language is the same; like oral language, written language is best learned through actual use in a social context.

Clearly, there are many paths to literacy. Conversations, pretend play, singing, poetry, pictures, storytelling, story acting, a print-rich environment, and reading stories all lead a child into literacy. Although music is often considered a “frill” to be enjoyed only after more serious academic work is completed, research on brain development suggests a connection between the neurological pathways activated by music and the part of the brain used to understand math and spatial concepts. In addition, singing enhances language and cognitive development.

Poetry and songs are fun to memorize and once learned are long remembered. Unusual vocabulary and complex word structures are often taken in stride when they appear in songs and poetry. Of course, children don’t always know exactly what all the words mean; cross-eyed bears named Gladly (from the hymn *Gladly My Cross I’d Bear*) and other misnomers are common among two-year-olds. But playing

and experimenting with language can lead to expanded vocabulary, enhanced phonemic awareness, and creative use of language—rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. Abilities to hear and use these aspects of language are strongly correlated with learning to read.

### **Singing**

Infants are biologically primed to respond to the human voice, its rhythms and melody. Infants and young children love to rock, walk, dance, and bounce to the steady beat of a nursery rhyme; they are soothed by the soft sounds of a lullaby. While there are, of course, many wonderful songs written for infants and young children, making up songs using children’s names to fit a particular occasion can be particularly soothing and pleasurable. Honig (1995) observes, “When a baby hears his own name repeated over and over in the phrases of a song, he feels that he is in a place where people know his needs and can comfort him” (p. 73). What better way to give pleasure to an infant, toddler, or preschooler, to ease transition and separation anxieties, increase closeness between caregivers and children, and awaken early humor than to sing to (and with) them (Honig, 1995)?

Singing boosts early language skills (including phonemic awareness), enhances memory and listening skills, and increases attention span. Song picture books provide a natural bridge between art, music, literature, and language. According to Jalongo and Ribblett (1997), these books support literacy by:

- Building on familiarity and enjoyment
- Providing repetition and predictability

## Handout 5b

- Expanding vocabulary and knowledge of story structures
- Promoting critical thinking and problem solving
- Fostering creative expression and language play

### Poetry

A study by Engel (1995) found that four-year-olds are quite attuned to the different types of rhyming patterns, formats, and metaphoric imagery of poetry. After listening to authors such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, four-year-olds in her study were invited to dictate their own stories in response. In their stories they incorporated the styles used by these authors. Children who are exposed to poetry, songs, and stories not only have enhanced language skills, but often become quite creative in their use of language. Engel (1996/97) tells the story of a three-year-old who is painting a watercolor picture: "Her mother asks her if she would like to write anything to go with her picture. The young painter nods immediately and dictates, "The guy who went up the steep nicken and then he fell down and hurt his nicken on the schnoks and the nicks.'" Engel notes that for this child, the process of making up words and creating alliterations is as important as the content of the story.

### Movement

Accompanying songs and poems with body motions, dance, and finger plays aids large and small muscle development and helps

children integrate language, social, cognitive, and physical competencies. Research has shown that the right and left hemispheres of the brain can be stimulated to work more efficiently together through movement. From babies' first attempts at pat-a-cake and peek-a-boo to the elaborate finger plays and dances of preschool, songs and poetry help children develop grace, humor, creativity, and a love of language in all its richness and complexity.

### Summary

- Playing and experimenting with language through songs and poetry lead to expanded vocabulary and creative use of language—rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. The ability to hear and use these aspects of language is strongly correlated with learning to read.
- Singing with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers eases transitions and separation anxieties, increases closeness between caregivers and children, and awakens early humor.
- Singing boosts early language skills (including phonemic awareness), enhances memory and listening skills, and increases attention span.
- Accompanying songs and poems with body motions, dance, and finger plays aids large and small muscle development and helps children integrate language, social, cognitive, and physical competencies.

## Literacy-Enhanced Activity Centers

Traditionally, early childhood teachers have set up learning centers that encourage the active exploration of many types of materials—clay, Play Doh, blocks, sand and water, puzzles, science, and manipulatives. These centers provide opportunities for children to develop oral language and to learn through concrete experiences with materials and other children. Teachers frequently read aloud to children, individually and in groups, and there is usually a listening center where children can hear tape-recorded stories, and a cozy book corner with large cushions, a variety of books and puppets, and a flannel board. In this inviting corner, children read individually and with peers, enhancing both literacy development and the enjoyment of reading.

In addition, in an environment that supports early literacy development, there is a writing center, well stocked with a variety of writing tools and surfaces, including crayons, markers, portable chalk boards, easels, dry-erase boards, alphabet blocks, letter tiles, an assortment of alphabet puzzles, and an alphabet pocket chart.

Recently, with increased understanding of the importance of social interaction and meaningful literacy experiences for optimal literacy development, many teachers are looking for new ways to create a “print-rich” environment, one that encourages “print awareness.” Labels, signs, charts, calendars, and lists that children

help create not only help organize the environment, but also encourage children to use print in functional and useful ways.

Literacy-enriched activity centers encourage children to further explore the relationship between reading and writing. With the addition of telephone books, address books, and message pads by the phone, materials for writing letters and lists, cookbooks, and books to read to dolls and stuffed animals, a housekeeping corner can provide numerous opportunities for children to explore print. A nearby grocery play center, complete with newspaper ads, cash register receipts, coupons, a typewriter and typing paper, inventory sheets, pads of paper, labeled food materials such as cereal boxes, and toy paper money can provide a natural complement.

A natural connection between art and writing can be strengthened by encouraging children to illustrate stories (their own and others’) and to create stories about their drawings and paintings—dictating them to a responsive adult, and/or writing them using developmental spelling.

In the block corner, children can make signs and labels for their structures. Books such as Forrest Wilson’s *What it Feels Like to be a Building* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Block City* demonstrate that books can be sources of information and ideas. Similarly, teachers can use their creativity to enhance literacy in all centers. Engaging children in discussions about what items to include in a particular center builds awareness and excitement.

## Handout 6b

Teachers can link children's fantasy play with storytelling by:

- Encouraging children to act out stories from books
- Creating stories from children's play (for example, when teachers listen carefully to children's pretend play, they can bring the fantasies back into the classroom by including them in group storytelling)
- Placing props and books in activity centers, such as a boat with plastic farm animals for *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, and hats and costumes for the *Little Red Hen*

Cooper (1993) tells about a preschool teacher who placed a copy of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (which she had read aloud earlier) and a small wooden boat in the housekeeping corner. She was delighted to see one four-year-old immediately begin to act out the story upon finding the props (Cooper, 1993). Rowe (1998) found that children in her study had a strong need to link play and books, and skillfully shifted between book talk and book-related play.

Morrow and Rand (cited in Rybczynski & Troy, 1995) found that with adult guidance and support, children in literacy-enriched play centers participated in more literacy behaviors during free playtime than did children in thematic centers without adult guidance. Stone and Christie (1996) found that children in their study spent approximately 40 percent of their time in the learning centers engaging in literacy activities.

### Additional Ideas for Literacy-Enhanced Activity Centers

- Sign-in charts for activities
- Cards with each child's name for taking turns
- Materials to make stop signs in the car/block area
- Individual pads and pencils for daily writing
- All fine motor activities—Play Doh, clay, easel painting, using scissors and manipulatives—enhance fine motor development, which is necessary for writing

## Handout 7a      Research on Play

**R**esearch on primates' and children's play has provided abundant evidence that play promotes cognitive, language, and social/emotional development (Bruner, 1972):

- Although teachers have been trained to pay close attention to the amount of children's "time on task," studies with primates indicate that it is the *very exaggeration and lack of economy of play* that encourages extension of the limits.

- Bruner concludes that primate play produces the flexibility that makes tool use possible. Studies with primates have found that tool use appears first in play, then in problem solving.

- It is probably the "push to variation" (rather than fixation by positive reinforcement) that gives chimpanzee manipulation such widespread efficacy—such opportunism as dipping sticks into beehives for honey, using sticks for clubbing lizards and rodents, and using branches for striking at or throwing at big felines.

- A number of laboratory studies indicate the necessity of initial play with materials in order for them to be converted to instrumental ends. Animals that successfully solved problems using tools *did so after an extended period of play with the tools*. Few succeeded before play.

- Studies demonstrated that, like chimps' play, children's play has positive effects on problem solving and concept development, effects that are substantially better than through direct instruction.

*Sociodramatic play*, in particular, has frequently been studied. It supports cogni-

tive development by providing opportunities for symbolic manipulation and verbal reasoning, and social development through social interaction and opportunities for collaborative problem solving. The fantasy and sociodramatic play of children can be viewed as a precursor to oral storytelling and story writing (Crowie, 1984). Children often make up their first stories in the context of pretend play. Preschoolers who spend more time at sociodramatic play (Berk & Winsler, 1995):

- Are advanced in general development
- Show an enhanced ability to understand the feelings of others
- Are seen as more socially competent by their teachers

Memory is also enhanced through fantasy play. Newman (1990) reported that opportunities for play with objects enhances children's ability to remember names of objects, and Silvern (1986) found that recall of an unfamiliar story is promoted by opportunities to act out the story.

In sum, *fantasy play* contributes to social maturity and the construction of diverse aspects of language and cognition. It enhances:

- Overall intellectual performance
- The generation of creative ideas
- Memory for diverse forms of information
- Language competence, especially the capacity to reason theoretically
- The differentiation of appearance and reality
- The playful stream of verbal narrative that comments on and assists us in coping with our daily life (Berk & Winsler, 1995)



## Handout 7b

Play, then, can help school become a place where learning makes sense. Children use all their intelligences to:

- Solve problems
- Learn new concepts
- Collaborate with others
- Make connections between what they know and what they want to know

Play offers opportunities for children to create something new, to develop self-direction, to take risks with impunity, and, perhaps most importantly, to develop habits of play that can last a lifetime (Wasserman, 1992). It is no wonder that Vygotsky regarded play as a leading factor in development, providing a stage between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and the abstract thoughts of adults: "In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (1978, p. 102).

Singer and Singer (cited in Berk & Winsler, 1995) argue that for optimal development of imagination, significant people in the child's life must establish a climate for make-believe, encouraging and accepting the child's imaginings with enthusiasm and respect. Following the child's lead and elaborating on the child's contribution helps "pretending" become a joint activity, with the child gradually taking over more responsibility for creating and implementing the fantasy theme (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Telling stories, initiating joint pretend, and providing materials (such as puppets and costumes) that inspire make-believe can help a child develop what Singer and Singer refer to as "a sense of wonder," a capacity that is key to developing the habits of mind for lifelong learning.

## Vivian Paley's Approach to Storytelling and Dramatization

*The richer the repertoire of storytelling styles a child is exposed to, the more possibilities for that child to develop his or her own powerful narrative voice, one that reflects both his community, his family, and his inner life" (Engel, 1996, p. 9).*

Children's stories provide valuable insight into what they think about and how they interpret their experiences. These narratives not only help to "get ordinary life under control" by anticipating the day's events, sorting out the week's routines, and recounting past experiences, but they also often lead to creative use of language—utilizing rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. According to Engel (1996/97), "storytelling is perhaps the most powerful way that human beings organize experience" and the "single strongest predictor of literacy."

How can child-care teachers help each child to "develop his or her own powerful narrative voice?" Vivian Paley, a preschool and kindergarten teacher, has written a number of books about her experience as a teacher. In *Wally's Stories*, she describes how she made the shift from a teacher-directed classroom (in which she was determined to teach the concepts that were in *her* mind) to a classroom in which she sought daily to uncover and describe the child's point of view. Over the years, storytelling, story playing, and fantasy play became the core curriculum.

From the beginning of her long teaching career, dramatic play—both children's pretend play and acting out fairy tales, storybooks, poems, and songs—was a popular activity. Children were also encouraged to dictate their own stories to an encouraging adult. However, Paley (1981) reports that few children (and these were mostly girls) chose to tell a story "if they could do something else instead" (p. 11). Obviously, writes Paley, "the words did not sufficiently represent the action, which needed to be shared" (p. 12). *Only when they began acting out each story the day it was written* (with the author as director), did story dictating become a popular activity. "For this alone, the children would give up playtime, as it was a true extension of play" (p. 12). According to Paley (1990):

Stories that are not acted out are fleeting dreams; private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. If in the press of a busy day, I am tempted to shorten the process by only reading the stories aloud and skipping the dramatizations, the children object. They say, "But we haven't done the story yet" (p. 25).

By the time Paley wrote *Wally's Stories* (1981), "acting had become the major integrating factor of the day, encircling and extending every other interest" (p. 66). On the 12-foot painted circle that was the stage, children dramatized three kinds of stories: picture-book stories, the children's own material, and fairy tales. Now the children's play and storytelling were connected and enriched through stories of all kinds. Stories written by adults

## Handout 8b

helped children learn new words and think in more complex and abstract ways. Fairy tales, in particular, “with their superior plot and carefully structured dialogue, set the tone and established the themes that enabled us to pursue new ideas and look more deeply at old ones” (p. 67). Writes Paley (1990):

A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose. I listen to the [children's] stories three times: when they are dictated, when we act them out, and finally at home, as I transcribe them from my tape recorder. After that, I talk about them to the children whenever I can. The stories are at the center of this fantasy of mine that one day I will link together all the things we do and say in the classroom (p. 3).

### **But How Does it Work in the Real World?**

In an online discussion of an early childhood listserv, several child-care providers shared their experiences with “Paley’s story dictating and story playing method.” Following are some insights from Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, workshop presenter, early childhood educator, and author; Ellen Edge and Jennifer deGroot-Knegt, child-care directors; and Tom Drummond, professor at North Seattle Community College. His comments are taken from guides to “Writing Stories in Preschool,” posted on the college Web site: <http://nscux.sccd.edu/~edeprog/wrtng.html>.

**How do you help children think of something to write?** Gurewitz Clemens wrote: “When asking children to dictate a story, I found asking for a story, a dream, or an adventure worked very well—some children felt that a story must be something they had learned from a book, and the other categories opened them to looking inside themselves.” Drummond added: “Another possibility is to simply prompt with, ‘Once upon a time’ to help the start.” Asking children to tell a story based on their interpretation of a picture is a strategy used in many preschools.

### **How much prompting and correcting should a teacher do to the children’s stories as they dictate them?**

Paley (1981) explained: “My role as a scribe is never passive—whenever possible, I enlarge the scope of the story, looking for points that need clarification and asking questions that might lead to new twist in the plot.” Gurewitz Clemens concurred:

If you can’t understand it, saying things like, “How did the bunny get onto the boat?” will not slow down even a shy, young child, in my experience. I think the communication must be one that can arrive in the hearer, or the play will not satisfy the author or the other children. On the other hand, correcting grammar is definitely out. Sheer poetry arises. I remember a child at Pacific Oaks Children’s School saying, “... and I went to a city that names New York City” in a rush of breath, and I thought about how New York indeed names itself and was glad of him.

## Handout 8c

Ellen Edge, who has used the method for several years, suggested that for older children, in particular, paying attention to the narrative thread is important. Questions such as, "Why did the lion eat the dinosaur?" and "How did he feel when he found out his dinosaur friend was eaten by that snake?" help children formulate coherent stories.

**How do you get started with the dramatizations?** All agreed that story acting was remarkably easy to get started. Gurewitz Clemens, who spent three days in Paley's classroom and presents workshops on Paley's method, wrote: "The children recognize the form instantly ... they know how to use it exactly the same way they knew how to use an easel when they first saw it ... it needs almost no explanation ... and it sets up a situation." DeGroot-Knegt agreed:

Absolutely! I was so surprised how easily it was implemented and how the children responded .... Although we've been doing stories forever, this has added an entirely new dimension to my program. We even had to go to the library to find a book of Greek mythology to read up on Athena and Medusa! It seems we have some incredible imaginations in our center! Sydney was right when she said it comes as naturally as pointing on an easel. When I first read Vivian's book I thought, no way—this can't happen without much introduction and guidance—not true!

Drummond noted developmental differences in children's use of narrative:

A few generalizations I have found: three-year-olds seem to me to be undamaged by the implied obligation to dictate, illustrate, and enact; fours seem to begin to explore power and identity through their stories; and fives take off into the realms of literacy creativity, finding a need for continuity and story line.

### What does it look like in action?

There are a number of ways for children to share their stories. Listserv participants suggested teachers adapt their strategies to their particular group of children. Edge suggested that children stay in the classroom to dictate their stories "because the other children will be curious and come over to see what you are doing. They listen to each other tell their stories, and borrow each others themes sometimes. They often argue about the story during the dictation, but the author always gets to make the final decision."

Gurewitz Clemens replied:

Paley didn't preview stories in this way. The author cast the play, the teacher read it, the children acted, and it was over. Often it was very, very quick. The first story I saw her do, with a three-year-old in a demonstration at Berkeley school, was of the following story:

I have these friends and those friends.

Paley asked the child to choose "these friends" and he picked one girl. She asked for "those friends" and he picked a boy. She asked if

## Handout 8d

he had any directions for them ... what should they be doing. He had them sit on the "stage," facing each other, and showed them, by wiggling his fingers, what to do. She asked, "You want them to play the piano?" And he nodded.

He watched as she read his play, the two children wiggled their fingers. It lasted about 10 seconds. It was magnificent. All three children left the stage looking satisfied and accomplished. And they were."

Clearly, there are many ways to act out stories; teachers can include children in discussions about how best to share their stories.

### **What Are Some Pitfalls to Avoid?** **Too many characters spoil the play.**

Of course, any new adventure is fraught with the unexpected. Drummond warns that there is indeed "a downside:" "Teachers have to learn to live through the chaos that sometimes occurs as the enactments are realized." DeGroot-Knegt replied: "No kidding—the first stories were short and easily reenacted. Then a competition of the quantity of characters overtook the writing process and there seemed to be no story—just a list of characters .... Today Ian wrote: 'The old man (he always has an old man) had 25 pets.' Then he listed 25 animals! How the heck can we act this out?"

DeGroot-Knegt's solutions included discussing it with the children to involve them in the problem solving and using Paley's one-page limit. Edge suggests, "When kids say there are 25 or 100 characters (as has happened with me), I say, 'How about

three, so there aren't too many kids?' We negotiate."

**How do you make sure all the children get turns to be in stories?** One of Paley's suggestions was "going around in a circle." In her first- and second-grade class, Gurewitz Clemens handed out blue cards to everyone as they began. She explained: "When you were in a play, you gave back your card. Authors had to call upon anyone with a blue card before choosing anyone without a card. The system for fairness must be fair in the children's eyes, so they should help design it."

**What about violent stories?** Gurewitz Clemens wrote: "We had a rule (I believe it was from Paley, but it was, in any event, a good rule) that authors had to warn characters if they were to die, and people could absolutely opt out if they didn't want to die." Drummond advises: "Killing and mayhem are part of the creative process for some children. Ensure in the rehearsal time that the children can think of a way to act out their part without touching anyone. Such skills are part of being an actor." Gurewitz Clemens added: "We had clear rules about violence, about pretending to hit but never, ever hitting. Some children have little boundary between play-acting and becoming the character, and they need special grounding and sometimes they need an adult right near to keep them from hurting others." Of course, some teachers are uncomfortable with "dying" in school, even when pretending. These issues must be negotiated.

## Handout 8e

### Benefits of Story Dictating and Acting

All agreed that there are many benefits of story acting—to children, to parents, and to the classroom culture. DeGroot-Knegt wrote:

We chose to keep a spiral journal for each child. The other day Amanda wrote a story and afterwards spent an hour drawing pictures that had ever single character! The frog, the mom and dad, the castle—it was breathtaking! We photocopied the story, then attached it to the picture to take home, yet could keep the original in her journal. Since we're open all summer, I think we're in for some great literacy and dramatic events.

Drummond wrote:

I wholeheartedly recommend that every early childhood program do this regularly with children. It is an almost guaranteed way to elicit from children their natural interest in learning to write narrative stories, illustrate them with drawings, dramatize them in collaboration with others, and read them to anyone who will listen. At first I didn't recognize its power, but after a full year, I saw the excitement, delight, and emotional catharsis that convinced me that this was indeed the right thing to do .... Parents treasure the children's thoughts and illustrations, are encouraged by the direct evidence that their children are learning to read and write, and

make sure they attend performances of the children's work. The children's stories, cooperatively written, make a fine end-of-the-year celebration.

Edge wrote:

What do I think the children learn? Well, they see me writing their words and reading their words, so they see the benefit of written text, for starters. They hear the words back a few hours later, see their word made flesh. We also publish their stories twice yearly, to accentuate the literacy benefits.

But I believe that Paley's overall belief was that this program brings together the children in the room. They get to know about each other in a way that is truly meaningful to them. There is a relationship between their fantasy play and this program, and the storytelling becomes a forum for their unique expression in which the others participate. It provides the teacher with a vocabulary for communication which is made up of the images, symbols, and fears that are specific to those children. (We know, for example, how a particular child feels about bears. He fears them and is at the same time fascinated with them. He often chooses to play bears in other children's stories. The other children think of him when they see a bear in a book. They know how he feels, and his feelings effect their storytelling.)

Paley said the stories became the culture of her classroom. Not the book



## Handout 8f

stories, although they had importance and value, but the children's own stories. Perhaps it is important for us to think about what makes the culture of our own classroom.

When children and teachers create a classroom culture with shared vocabulary, meaning, and experiences, Paley's books demonstrate that it is friendship, fantasy, and literacy that flourish. When teachers strive to "uncover and describe the child's point of view," children can bring all their capabilities to feel, think, and imagine to the classroom and beyond.

### Books by Vivian Paley

■ *White teacher*. (1979). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

■ *Wally's stories*. (1981). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

■ *Boys and girls: Superheroes in the doll corner*. (1984). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

■ *Mollie is three: Growing up in school*. (1986). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

■ *Bad guys don't have birthdays: Fantasy play at four*. (1988). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

■ *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in the classroom*. (1990). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

■ *You can't say you can't play*. (1992). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

■ *Kwanzaa and me: A teacher's story*. (1995). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

## Benefits of Story Reading

*It is the intimate sharing of a book between a child and a caring adult that helps the child grow to love and bond with books (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).*

Families of children who read early and “naturally” typically provide a language-rich and “print-rich” environment that fosters the child’s interest in literate activities. Books are everywhere and are frequently shared. Children’s efforts at reading and writing are accepted with interest and enthusiasm and enhanced by adult questions and encouragement. Adults and older siblings frequently read to themselves and out loud to infants and children, demonstrating the importance of literacy, as well as its enjoyment.

Researchers have found that extensive story-reading experience during the pre-school years is strongly correlated with successful literacy development during the elementary school years (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995; Schickedanz, 1986; Wells, 1986; Riley, 1994).

Schools and child-care programs can nurture children’s emergent literacy by creating an environment similar to the homes of children who read early and who enjoy reading. Young children who listen to stories from the comfort and security of a caregiver’s lap or in a cozy reading corner learn to listen and pay attention and have fun doing it (Healy, 1990); they develop a sense of rhythm

and rhyme, abilities that are strongly correlated with learning to read.

Although we often think of “real school” as a place where formal, direct instruction takes place at set times during the day, it is the animated, informal, interactive experiences with reading that set the stage for young children to become active, motivated readers. Because the *amount of time* children *choose* to read and have *opportunities* to read are strongly correlated with reading proficiency, early positive experiences with reading play a critical role in helping children become successful readers.

While reading to toddlers is hardly a group activity, older preschoolers and primary-grade children are increasingly able to listen to stories in a group setting. Reading aloud to a group of children creates a community of readers through enjoyment and shared knowledge (Braunger & Lewis, 1997). Sharing stories with young children helps build both physical and emotional closeness, and lays the foundation for a lifelong love of reading.

Listening to stories:

- Builds vocabulary and concept knowledge
- Aids development of sophisticated language structures
- Enhances:
  - Memory
  - Imagination
  - Attention span
  - Listening skills
- Helps children think in more complex, abstract, and creative ways
- Broadens children’s range of experience

## Handout 9b

- Helps children learn the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories or narrative text
- Aids the development of phonemic awareness through rhyme and alliteration

Recent research has confirmed the importance of providing children with daily opportunities to experience literature in active and pleasurable ways. Morrow (1992) suggests these daily activities:

- Reading and telling stories to children
- Dealing with stories through literal, interpretative, and critical discussions
- Integrating literature into themes being studied throughout the curriculum
- Having children share books they have read
- Responding to literature through written and oral language
- Participating in independent (alone or with a "buddy") reading and writing periods

## Handout 10a Brain Facts

■ Babies are born with 100 billion brain cells; however, only a relatively small number of neurons are connected. In the first decade of life, a child's brain forms trillions of connections.

■ Research on brain development has provided physiological evidence that early experiences and interactions do not just create a context for early development and learning, they *directly* affect the way the brain is wired. In turn, this wiring profoundly affects emotional, language, and cognitive development.

- Experiences do not just influence children's development, they allow the child to finish the work of building the unfinished brain that nature has provided. Fully three-quarters of the human brain develops outside the womb, in direct relationship with the physical and social environment (Shore, 1997).

■ Brain development is especially rapid during the first year. Brain scans show that by the age of one, a baby's brain qualitatively resembles that of a normal young adult.

- By age three, a baby's brain has formed about 1,000 trillion connections—about twice as many as adults have.

■ The years between three and 10, described as "years of promise" by the 1996 Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, are a time of rapid development of social, linguistic, cognitive, and physical competencies, corresponding with dramatic neurological changes (Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, 1996).

- Brain activity in children ages three to 10 is more than twice that of adults, and although new synapses continue to be formed throughout life, "never again will the brain be able to master new skills so readily or rebound from setbacks so easily" (Nash, 1997, p. 56).

■ At age 11, the brain begins to prune extra connections at a rapid rate. The circuitry, or "wiring," that remains is more specific and efficient (Shore, 1997).

- The brain has been called the ultimate example of the saying, "use it or lose it:" connections that are used repeatedly in the early years become permanent; those that are not are eliminated.

Brain research helps us understand not only how and when the brain develops but what kinds of experiences and environments support development:

■ *Social relations are central to every aspect of a child's development.* Active and engaged care is essential for children's brain maturation and for social, emotional, and intellectual development. For older children, caring adults are still vitally important. In addition, sharing ideas, experiences, and opinions with peers both challenges and expands children's thinking and builds social competence.

■ *Children learn best in a psychologically safe environment.* Brain research indicates that emotional intelligence is the bedrock upon which to build other intelligences, and that it is more closely linked to lifelong success than is IQ (Goleman, cited in O'Neil, 1996). Research has demonstrated that emotions can speed up or inhibit the thinking process. Under conditions of high stress, the brain goes into

## Handout 10b

“survival mode”; higher-order thinking is impeded.

- Gunnar’s (1996) research on cortisol, a hormone that is easily measured because it is present in saliva, helps to explain why stressful and/or abusive environments have an adverse effect on brain development. Adverse or traumatic events elevate the level of cortisol in the brain. Excessively and chronically high levels of cortisol alter the brain by making it vulnerable to processes that destroy brain cells responsible for thought and memory. Just as importantly, cortisol reduces the number of connections in certain parts of the brain.

■ *The brain is designed as a pattern detector; perceiving relationships and making connections are fundamental to the learning process* (Caine & Caine, 1990). The brain resists learning isolated pieces of information, such as unconnected facts and words that don’t make sense. Children (and adults) learn best when they can actively make sense of their experience.

■ *Effective teaching builds on the experience and knowledge that children bring to*

*school.* In order to make sense of their experiences, children need help to make connections between the known and unknown. For example, a child who has had little experience with storybooks but who loves to tell stories and engage in dramatic play can be encouraged to act out a story that is read aloud.

■ *Effective teaching enables children to use all their senses and intelligences.* Music, drama, and arts instruction have been linked to higher achievement test scores and higher scores on tests of creative thinking, art appreciation, reading, vocabulary, and math (Hancock, 1996). It is important for children to be physically active in the classroom. Physical movement juices up the brain, feeding it nutrients in the form of glucose and increasing nerve connections—all of which make it easier for kids of all ages to learn (Hancock, 1996). Generally speaking, the younger the child, the more important it is for active engagement with materials, peers, and teachers in order for learning to take place.

## Handout 11a **Storybook Reading by Children Who Are Not Yet Reading**

and

### **The Transition from Oral to Written Language**

**R**esearch on storybook reading during the early years has identified a number of ways that reading aloud helps children to become motivated and competent readers and writers. Holdaway, who introduced “shared book” experience into school classrooms, describes the three phases of experience through which a favorite book passes in the bedtime story:

First there is a successful introduction to the book for the purpose of enjoyment. There may be considerable participation and questioning by the child in a relaxed and unpressured way .... Second, the child demands many repetitions over the next few days or weeks—the “read-it-again” phenomenon .... Third, the child spends many happy hours independently with the favorite book, role-playing as reader and recreating the familiar experience with increasing sophistication. (Park, 1982, p. 816).

Through repeated readings, and with the help of illustrations and their growing understanding that print makes sense, children develop their storybook-reading ability. Children who learn to read without formal instruction have often been described

as teaching themselves to read from favorite storybooks. Long before they can actually read print, children often “read” the illustrations of a book or a memorized rhyme or story to themselves, parents, friends, pets, and stuffed animals. These reenactments model the adult’s storybook reading and draw their attention to print. Hiebert observes, “When the information at the word level is not yet available to children, their text expectations draw their attention to individual words and support the development of an ever-expanding reading vocabulary” (p. 3).

Increasingly, researchers consider storybook reading by children who are not yet reading an important part of literacy development (Hiebert, 1998; MacGillivray, 1997; Sulzby, 1985). After reviewing the literature and listening to children from two to five years old read their favorite picture storybook, Sulzby (1985) developed broad categories for a classification scheme of patterns of young children’s storybook-reading behaviors.

■ Children’s early attempts to read (when asked to read to an adult) are based on pictures, and stories are not yet formed. In this stage, children merely describe the pictures in a storybook without using book language.

■ Next, children still rely on pictures, but stories are formed. These first story-reading attempts sound like oral language and may not closely follow the text.

■ Before children can decode the printed word, their storytelling becomes increasingly like written language. They progress from treating individual pages of story-



## Handout 11b

books as if they are discrete units to treating the book as a unit.

■ When children treat the book as a unit, they weave stories across the book's pages, progressing from a mixture of oral and written languagelike reading, to "reading" that is quite similar to the original story.

■ In these later stages, although the illustrations still may be needed to jog their memory of the story, children demonstrate that they are learning the structure as well as the linguistic features of stories by "talking like a book" (Clay, 1977). By now, children who have been read to frequently have developed a number of expectations about stories; first and foremost, they expect a story to make sense.

■ Finally, children's attention begins to focus on print, as well as on illustrations. In the early stages of attending to the printed text, children may focus on a few known words, a few letters and associated sounds, or the remembered text (Sulzby, 1985). During these first stages of reading the printed word, children may use a number of strategies to keep stories meaningful, including reading word for word from a memorized or predictable book and telling stories from pictures when the print is too difficult to decode verbatim.

During a storybook reading, adults may ask children questions to assist problem solving, they may provide information (e.g., labeling objects), and they may read only part of a story while allowing the child to "read" the predictable text, such as a refrain of a song. By providing many relaxed, interactive experiences with reading and

writing, children are helped to develop skills and strategies to understand written texts. In this way, children transition from oral language, which is face-to-face and interactive, to *written* language, which is more formal and lacks contextual cues, such as gestures and intonation.

**Repeated readings.** Both reading aloud and encouraging repeated readings of storybooks can be an important part of the curriculum in early childhood classrooms. Following storyreading, just as in the homes of successful early readers, children should have opportunities to reread the books, poems, and songs independently. When enlarged texts are used, tape recordings of many selections should be available, and little books of the same title should always be available (Routman, 1994). Children who have had few prior book experiences, in particular, need numerous experiences with texts to focus on critical features and to remember them (Hiebert, 1997).

Morrow (1988) studied the effects of repeated readings of storybooks in school settings on children of lower socioeconomic status. These one-on-one storyreadings encouraged interaction between the teacher and child. She found that children in the repeated-book group had significantly more responses dealing with print and story structure, and more interpretative and predictive responses. Children with lower-ability skills, in particular, benefited from repeated readings.

## Handout 12a Developmental Spelling

### Beginnings

*Translation: My Mom took us to the store to get some tomato juice.*

FSVOR  
NBPPTNGBLAHOLZ.  
EGXAKO HNYILW HIGAS.  
IHILR  
IHNYODOUW.



### Consonants

One letter, usually the first one heard, is used to represent the word.

*Translation: I went out on a boat and caught a fish this big.*

I w t n a b  
K a f s b

### Initial and Final Consonants

The first and last sounds are represented.

*Translation: The next day some more flowers grew.*

The ns De  
Sm mr FL os  
gro

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## Handout 12b Vowel/Consonant Combinations

Consonants and vowels start to appear in the middle of words.

*Translation: Me and my best friend sledding downhill with my friend's Dad. His [Dad] made a jump for us.*

Me an m bes frd  
Sleddn dn hill w m  
frns dad. His  
Mad a mp for s.

### Words

All syllables in the words are represented.

*Translation: Chris, you are sleeping. You woke up when everybody left. You are clumsy. You were snoring. Zzzzzzz.*

Chris  
You are Sloping  
You Wook  
up wen  
ericy Buty  
left.  
You are  
clumzy  
You were  
snoring.  
honshew



### Standard Spelling

Children begin to build a repertoire of spelling patterns, and add to their store of sight words.

*Translation: Once upon a time, there was an old old woman who had a dog. The woman's name was Polly. The dog's name was Sally. Sally was a quiet dog, except for when she was hungry. So Polly knew what Sally wanted when Sally barked.*

Once upon a time  
There was an old old  
woman who had a dog  
The woman's name was Polly.  
The dog's name was Sally.  
Sally was a quiet dog,  
except for when  
she was hungry. So Polly  
knew what Sally wanted  
when Sally barked.

Source: Cherry Valley Elementary School, Polson, Montana.

## Handout 13a **Suggestions for Including Families and the Community in Literacy Activities**

### **Published Books**

Children's *own published books* can include an "about the author" section and a comment page for parents and visitors to use in responding to the book. Children who have difficulty coming up with their own story can be encouraged to retell a traditional story, such as *Thumbelina*, or to create an innovation of a familiar story, such as *Red Deer, Red Deer*. These books can then go home with children and be shared with family members (Cherry Valley Elementary School, Polson, Montana).

**Traveling books.** Written as a group, with each child contributing a page on a shared topic, these books offer opportunities for families to see the progress of all the children in the class, as well as their own child. Doug Crosby of Cherry Valley Elementary School in Polson, Montana, comments:

Think about a worksheet—it might take 10 or 15 minutes to fill out a worksheet and it will be thrown away or hung on the fridge. Take a traveling book. It might take an hour to make it. Each child might read it with their mom and dad for 10 minutes. It comes back to the classroom, becomes part of the classroom library and is read during the day and, at the end of the year, becomes part of the school library. How many hours of reading and enjoyment is that book giving to kids?

**Including the larger community.** At Cherry Valley Elementary School, parents regularly bring children's published books to Polson's doctors' and dentists' offices. Now, along with copies of *Field and Stream* and parenting magazines, local residents can not only read the latest student works; they can also sign their name and write responses to the book on the comment page.

**Authors' parties.** Families and friends are invited to listen to their child read his or her own individually written and illustrated books, make comments in the comment section, and then move on to another child.

**Floppy Rabbit's Journal.** Each night, a stuffed rabbit named Floppy goes home with a different child, armed with a reading bag that contains a draft writing book, a journal, and colored pencils. On the first page, "Welcome to Floppy Rabbit's Journal," it is explained to parents that because "Floppy is not too good at writing yet," it is up to the person who takes Floppy home to confer with parents to correct spelling and punctuation, and to "help it make sense." Then the adventure is written into Floppy's journal, accompanied by a colored picture. In addition, parents are encouraged to write their own version of Floppy's stay, so children can see that their parents also like to write (Cherry Valley Elementary School, Polson, Montana).

**The Writer's Briefcase.** Filled with paper, blank books, stapler and staples, crayons, markers, pens, pencils, stencils, envelopes, clipboard, scissors, pencil sharpener, paper clips, paper fasteners, a vari-

## Handout 13b

ety of stickers and gummed labels, and an article for parents explaining the reading/writing process you use in your classroom, this briefcase can be taken home by a different child every night.

**Student-made school and/or class newsletters.** These help keep parents informed and included.

**Book in a bag.** Children take home a book in a bag for home reading with family members. Adding both a comment section and a “tips for parents and caregivers” section encourages active family involvement.

**Literacy fairs.** Literacy fairs are a great way to celebrate literacy accomplishments and educate the community about your approach to literacy instruction.

**Family stories.** Family stories are narratives in which the youngster or other relatives are the featured characters in simple home adventures of days gone by (Buchoff, 1995). Buchoff writes, “Every family has its own unique body of stories that can be transmitted to the children of the family through the pleasure of story telling. Since it is often difficult for adults to recollect a special memory or specific anecdote on the spur of the moment, it can be quite helpful when children are provided with a list of “Tell me about” prompts. Examples of such prompts might include: “Tell me about something I did when I was little” or “Tell me about when you got lost on the mountain.” Young children can record their stories on audiotape or videotape and the teacher can transcribe them, or children can dictate the

stories to an adult or older child. Children can also illustrate their stories and act them out.

### **Intergenerational relationships.**

Establishing a relationship with residents at a local nursing home can benefit all concerned. At Cherry Valley Elementary School, children, both in multiage groups and with their classrooms, have been visiting a local nursing home and establishing a relationship with one or more residents. Children then interview the residents, who frequently tell stories about their lives. Young children may simply remember as much as they can, while older children take notes. They then write the stories, publish them, and take them back to the nursing home, where they read to the elderly residents.

**The Mom and Dad Book.** Jennifer de Groot, child-care director at Kente Kinder Centre in Ontario, Canada, offers this suggestion: “We ask children to bring pictures of parents, grandparents, or other caregivers to make a cooperative class book. One page is allotted for each child. We ask children to dictate stories about what their parents do and what they like them to do with them. Children also illustrate their stories. It is wonderful to read through when they are missing their parents throughout the day. These books can also be checked out and taken home by children.”

**Bulletin board.** Make a special bulletin board for displaying drawings and writing by children about their families and invite children to contribute. So that children

## Handout 13c

aren't pressured to participate, this activity should not be required (Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, author and teacher).

**Meet the teacher day.** On an early childhood listserv, a child-care director suggested: "To help get to know each other, we send a bag home with families who attend 'Meet the Teacher Day.' We ask the students to put five things they like in the bag or five things about themselves or their families. Attach a note to each bag to welcome the student and explain the purpose of the bag. Put together a bag for yourself that goes home with the children's bags. If a child misses the meeting, we send the bag in the mail. Each child then brings the bag to the first day of school."

**Family banner.** At a child-care center, teachers supply a kit for each child to take home to make a family banner. The kits contain fabric, glue, scissors, markers, and other materials, at a cost of about \$1. Each family designs their own banner, which is displayed throughout the year, hanging from the ceiling. They then display the banners at a family picnic in a nearby park.

**Supporting multicultural awareness.** In a recent workshop, teachers in a migrant-education program were discussing how dif-

ficult it was when Mexican families often planned a return to Mexico to visit relatives during the middle of the school year, "just when the students are finally learning to read." Because when the children return they frequently have not maintained their literacy skills and have to "start all over again," some teachers had been trying unsuccessfully to persuade families to postpone their trips home until summer (at the height of the harvest season) or even not to go at all.

One teacher, however, reported that her school staff had struggled with this issue, but "since visiting family was a vital part of the Latino culture that was unlikely to change," they had come up with a plan that benefited all concerned. An investment in inexpensive instant cameras for the children to take to Mexico, with instructions to "take pictures of all your relatives and write a story about each one to share with the class," enabled the children to use their literacy skills in a way that connected their families and culture to a meaningful learning experience that enriched the entire class. Some mothers also organized a workshop where they hand-stitched covers for the cameras and taught their skill to other parents.



## Handout 14a Research on Bilingual Education

**A**lthough bilingual and bicultural children have the potential to enrich the classroom environment with diverse ways of seeing and understanding, their discourse and literacy styles are often seen as a liability. Utilizing the expertise of teachers, parents, and other community members of diverse cultural and linguistic groups can do much to counter the deeply held and often unconscious biases that guide our behavior and that may cause us to value only one way of talking, understanding, and behaving. Children and teachers of the dominant culture can learn from children from diverse cultures, enhancing their own lives and their ability to “become citizens of the global community” (Delpit, 1995, p. 69).

There is widespread agreement among researchers that bilingual education is the most effective and pedagogically sound way of providing early childhood education for the many language-minority students in the nation’s schools (Fillmore, 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988; Wolfe, 1992). According to Wolfe (1992), “effective bilingual programs instruct children in all of the academic subjects in their primary languages while they are developing proficiency in English” (p. 139). Researchers based their position on the following premises:

■ During the first five years, children are learning their primary language at a rapid pace. Because language and thought are interdependent, a firm command of the native language is vital for conceptual

development (Cummins, 1986; Wolfe, 1992; Fillmore, 1991).

■ Children under the age of five have not reached a stable enough command of their native language not to be affected by the immersion in English-only classrooms that they typically encounter (Fillmore, 1991). Thus, acquisition of English as a second language by young children may result not in bilingualism, but in the erosion or loss of their primary language, dubbed “subtractive bilingualism” by Lambert (cited in Wong Fillmore, 1991).

■ Conversely, when children are able to learn their primary language with all its richness and complexity, they are able to transfer these skills to a new language (Wolfe, 1992).

■ Contrary to popular belief, young children develop proficiency—which is not the same as fluency—in a second language slowly, over a five-to-seven-year period (Wolfe, 1992). Young children who are forced to give up their primary language and adjust to an English-only environment may not only lose their first language, but may not learn the second language well (Fillmore, 1991).

■ When children have only a partial command of two languages, they may mix both languages in what Selenker (1972) called “fossilized versions of inter-languages,” rather than using fully formed versions of the target languages (Fillmore, 1991). This inability to speak any language with proficiency puts children at high risk for school failure.

■ The loss of the heritage language can seriously jeopardize children’s relationships with their families, who may not be fluent in English. The inability to commu-

## Handout 14b

nicate with family members has serious consequences for the emotional, social, and cognitive development of linguistically diverse children (Cummins, 1986; Wolfe, 1992; Fillmore, 1991).

Creating a classroom environment that values and accepts children's home culture and language is the first step in helping children feel proud, not ashamed, of their "mother tongues, their origins, their group, and their culture" (Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). Bilingual education, in which children are encouraged to use their first languages while supporting their acquisition of English, is optimal; however, due to lack of qualified minority-language speakers and the challenges of meeting the needs of children in a multilingual classroom, this approach is often impractical.

### Strategies that Work:

■ *Collaboration with parents and linguistically diverse members of the community* is an effective way to provide opportunities for children to maintain their own language and to validate its importance. Parents can be encouraged to converse with and tell and read stories to their children in their native language, at home and at school. Developing strong family/school partnerships is essential to providing cultural continuity for children (Wolfe, 1992).

■ *By understanding the way children learn a first language, teachers can apply these principles to help children learn English.* While until recently English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) methods of teaching had a strong behavioristic, skills orientation, current practices emphasize a whole-lan-

guage approach. ESL literature identifies attainment of communicative competence as the goal of instruction (Fillmore & Valadez, 1986). With the recognition that language is best learned through actual use in a nonthreatening social context, language use is encouraged by focusing on meaning rather than correctness of form, regarding errors as part of the learning process.

■ *Contextual cues, such as gestures, actions, pictures, manipulatives, and other hands-on, real objects, can help children connect words with meaning.* As Okagaki and Sternberg (1994) point out, for children with limited English skills, following teachers' directions and even "figuring out what to do to stay minimally out of trouble is an enormous task" (p. 18). While Anglo teachers typically value the decontextualized "text" over the context, Delpit (1995) observes that other groups, such as Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and African Americans, place a far greater value on context. In a classroom setting, while an Anglo teacher frequently directs children to do something while he or she is engaged in a different task, other cultural groups typically match words with actions.

For example, if a Native American teacher says, "Copy the words," she is at the blackboard pointing. Delpit (1995) points out, "The Anglo teacher asks the children to attend to what he says, not what he does; the Native American teacher, on the other hand, supports her words in a related physical context. What gets *done* is at least as important as what gets said" (p. 98). To help linguistically diverse children feel secure and competent in the class-

## Handout 14c

room setting, as well as to promote English proficiency, teachers should learn to provide as many cues as possible to aid understanding.

■ *Providing ample time for children to answer questions can increase the number and quality of responses for all children.*

Increasing the “wait time” from the usual one second or less to three or more seconds can provide needed time for children not only to reflect on their answers but to hear their words in a second language.

■ *Finally, providing bilingual signs around the classroom, learning as many words as possible in children’s primary languages, and encouraging children to teach the class a few words in their language can convey the message that diverse languages are valued.*

### Styles of Discourse and Literacy

**Dialect.** Teachers often insist on remediate the dialect of African American, Native American, and Alaska Native students. Many researchers and educators, however, contend that constant correction can have a damaging effect on children’s self-esteem, attitude toward school, and ability and motivation to learn to read and speak standard English (Delpit, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). When teachers model respect and acceptance of children for who they are, children are much more likely to identify with teachers as role models and want to emulate their styles of speech and behavior.

Delpit (1995) provides this example from a Mississippi preschool, where a teacher had been “drilling her three- and four-year-old students on responding to the greeting, ‘Good morning, how are you?’

with ‘I’m fine, thank you.’ Posting herself near the door one morning, she greeted a four-year-old black boy in an interchange that went something like this” (p. 51):

Teacher: Good morning, Tony, how are you?

Tony: I be’s fine.

Teacher: Tony, I said, How are you?

Tony: (with raised voice) I be’s *fine*.

Teacher: No, Tony, I said *how are you?*

Tony: (angrily) I done told you, I *be’s fine* and I ain’t telling you no more!

Delpit (1995) points out that it is unlikely that Tony will want to identify with this teacher, who is as unpleasant as she is inscrutable. Yet children like Tony may experience many such invalidating and confusing attempts to make them conform to standard English, both in literacy instruction and everyday conversation.

### Strategies that Work

Helping children to become aware of the speech patterns of various cultural groups, and comparing and contrasting styles, is an effective way to expose children to alternative forms and to provide opportunities to practice them in a nonthreatening environment. In addition, all children are helped to realize the value and fun of knowing different ways to talk (Boutte & McCormick, 1992). Following are some strategies that have been identified by two well-known African American educators, Lisa Delpit and Gloria Ladson-Billings:

■ In the sixth-grade classroom of Ann Lewis, students were permitted to express themselves in the language (in speaking and writing) with which they are knowledgeable and comfortable. “They were then

## Handout 14d

required to 'translate' to the standard form. By the end of the year, the students were not only facile at this 'code-switching,' but could better use both languages" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 161).

■ For younger children, discussions about the differences in the ways television characters from different cultural groups speak can provide a starting point. A collection of the many children's books written in the dialects of various cultural groups and audiotaped stories narrated by individuals from different cultures provide authentic ways to learn about linguistic diversity (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).

■ Mrs. Pat, a teacher chronicled by Shirley Brice Heath, had her students become language "detectives," interviewing a variety of individuals and listening to the radio and television to discover the differences and similarities in the ways people talked (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).

■ Native Alaskan teacher Martha Demientieff helps her students understand "book language" by contrasting the "wordy," academic way of speaking and writing with the metaphoric style of their heritage language, where they say a great deal with a few words. Students work individually, in pairs, or in groups to write papers with enough words "to sound like a book." They then take these papers and try to reduce the meaning to a few sentences. Finally, students further reduce the meaning to a "saying" brief enough to go on the front of a T-shirt, and the sayings are put on little paper T-shirts that the students cut out and hang throughout the room (Delpit, 1995, p. 62).

■ Demientieff also analyzes her students' writings for what has been referred to as

Village English and fills half a bulletin board with these words, labeling it "Our Heritage Language." On the other half of the bulletin board, she puts an equivalent statement under the label "Formal English." She and the students spend a long time on the "Heritage English," savoring the nuances and discussing how good it feels.

Then, she turns to the other side of the board and explains that there are people who will judge them by the way they talk or write, and that in order to get jobs, they will need to talk like "those people who only know and can only really listen to one way." She affirms that although they will have to learn two ways of talking, they will always know their heritage English is best. She compares formal English to a formal dinner and heritage English to a picnic. The students then prepare a formal dinner in the class; they dress up, use fancy tablecloths, china, and silverware, and speak only formal English. Then they prepare a picnic where only informal English is allowed (Delpit, p. 41).

■ Teachers who do not share the culture and languages of their students can ask students to "teach" the teacher and other students aspects of their language. They can "translate" songs, poems, and stories into their own dialect or into "book language" and compare the differences across the cultural groups represented in the classroom (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).

All of these strategies affirm children's culture and language, while at the same time children are helped to learn the skills to operate in the dominant society.

## Some Strategies to Encourage Independent Reading and Writing

How do teachers meet the individualized learning needs of 25 children, all at vastly different developmental and reading levels? Here are a few strategies from classrooms across the Northwest:

■ *Encourage the use of developmental spelling*, sometimes referred to as “phonics-based spelling” (cited in Regie Routman’s *Literacy at the Crossroads*), for first drafts.

■ *Develop a list of frequently used words* and have it readily available for all children. Other strategies include:

- Word cards with common words stuck to the wall
- Poems and songs on chart packs
- Dictionaries of various sizes and degrees of complexity
- “Banks” of “juicy” words (adjectives and verbs)
- Walls filled with print—charts, posters, children’s work

■ *Independent book tubs or “Browsing Boxes”* containing books selected to match children’s reading level (as evidenced by their ability to read the words with 95 percent accuracy) help ensure successful

reading and build confidence. Books can be a combination of teacher- and child-chosen selections.

■ Having a *number of choices* of reading material, including children’s own learning logs and journals, poems and books that have been memorized, and print-filled walls, helps children be successful with a minimum of teacher instruction.

■ *Literacy enhanced activity centers*—dramatic play/housekeeping areas with literacy props, puzzles, games, listening centers, computers, poems, Play Doh, and sand for writing in with a stick or finger—allow children to find their comfort level before branching out to other forms of literacy.

■ *Use of manipulatives* (blocks, puzzles, Legos, alphabet letters, Play Doh, clay, scissors, and drawing and painting supplies) helps children to develop eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills. Many children have had few opportunities to manipulate objects, having spent a great deal of time in front of television sets.

■ Encourage children to help each other. Cooperative learning activities, such as “buddy reading,” can enhance enjoyment and increase competence. Permission and encouragement to “ask a friend” helps make learning fun and decreases the need for teacher direction.

## Handout 16

### Research on How Children Acquire Phonics Knowledge

■ Most young children have difficulty analyzing words into separate sounds, for example, separating “cat” into its three letters and corresponding sounds. This is because phonemes are not discrete units. The attributes of a phoneme spill over into those that come before it and follow it in a word (Adams, 1990; Gunning, 1995; Treiman, 1985).

■ Children become sensitive to rhyme at an early age. Bryant et al. (1989) showed that nursery rhyme knowledge at three years was related to reading ability at six years even after differences in social background and IQ were taken into account.

■ Goswami and Bryant (1990) suggested that the linguistic units onset and rime may be crucial in explaining the robust link between rhyming and reading. *Onset* is the initial consonant or consonant clusters, and *rime* is the vowel of a syllable plus any consonants that might follow. For example, in the word “cat,” *c* is the onset and *at* is the rime; in the word “splat,” *spl* is the onset and *at* is the rime.

■ Wise et al. (1990) found that first-grade readers who learned to read words by segmenting them into onset and rime sub-units remembered how to read the words better than readers who segmented the words into other units.

■ Children who recognize onsets and rimes can learn to make analogies between spelling patterns in words to help them read new words. For example, a child who can

read *table* can more easily learn to read *stable*, *cable*, *gable*, and *fable*. Adams (1990) concluded that an analogy approach is not only a strategy used by skilled readers but also an effective method for teaching students to decode.

■ In several studies, Goswami (1986, 1990) found that reading words by analogy develops earlier than reading words by sequential (letter-by-letter) decoding.

■ The more print words children recognize, the better children are able to make analogies between letter strings representing onsets and rime (Ehri & Robbins, 1992).

■ The ability to make analogies (e.g., from *cat* to *mat*, *smile* to *vile*, *table* to *stable*, and *beak* to *peak*) eliminates the need for the child to blend phonemes in the rimes of new words because the blended rimes are supplied by the reader’s memory for the known words. Because blending is known to be a difficult operation, this ability leads to more efficient word recognition (Ehri & Robbins, 1992).

Based on these findings, focusing on onsets and rimes can help children develop phonemic awareness and learn to make analogies between spelling patterns in words to help them read new words. At the same time, in order to divide words into onsets and rimes, children are learning to understand how letters symbolize sounds and how to blend parts of known words with parts of new words (Ehri & Robbins, 1992). For example, a child who can read *cat*, can more easily learn to read *bat*, *sat*, *mat*, *pat*, and *that*.



## Handout 17a Summary of Strategies to Develop Decoding Skills

There are a number of ways that teachers can directly help children develop phonics knowledge that they can use in reading and writing. In *Creating Support for Effective Literacy Education*, Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, and Vento-Zogby (1996) offer these suggestions:

- Read and reread favorite nursery rhymes to reinforce the sound patterns of the language, and enjoy tongue-twisters and other forms of language play together.

- Read aloud to children from Big Books or charts large enough for all children in the group or class to see the print easily. Run a pointer or your hand or finger under the words, to help children make the association between spoken words and written words.

- Part of the time, choose Big Books and/or make charts of stories, poems, and rhymes that make interesting use of alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia.

- When sharing Big Books or charts, focus children's attention on the beginnings and ends of words. It is helpful to focus on elements that alliterate and rhyme, before focusing on individual sounds.

- The most effective and efficient phonics instruction focuses children's attention on noticing onsets and rimes. *Onset* is the initial consonant or consonant clusters, and *rime* is the vowel of a syllable plus any consonants that might follow. For

example, in the word "cat," *c* is the onset and *at* is the rime; in the word "splat," *spl* is the onset and *at* is the rime.

- During the discussion of onsets and/or rimes, you and the children can make charts of words with the same sound pattern (to help children use analogies to read new words).

- Read alphabet books with children, and make alphabet books together.

- Read with children other books that emphasize sound—books such as *Noisy Poems* edited by Jill Bennett, *Deep Down Underground* by Oliver Dunrea, and Dr. Seuss books. Comment on sounds.

- When reading together, help children use prior knowledge and context plus initial consonants to predict what a word will be; then look at the rest of the word to confirm or correct.

- Talk about letters and sounds as you write messages to children and as you help them compose something together or individually. This is a very important way of helping children begin to hear individual sounds in words as well as to learn to spell some of the words they write.

- Help children notice print in their environment—signs, labels, and other print.

- When children demonstrate in their attempts at writing that they realize letters represent sounds, help them individually to write the sounds they hear in words.

- Provide tape recordings of many selections for children to listen to as they follow along with the written text. It helps to provide small copies of the text, not just a Big Book or chart.

## **Handout 17b    What Children Can Do When They're Stuck on a Word**

- Look at the picture and the first letter of the word.
- Look for a known chunk or small word (e.g., *child* in *children*).
- Read the word using only the beginning and ending sounds.
- Think of a word that looks like the difficult word (e.g., if the word is "bat," think of a word that looks like this word, only with a different first letter).
- Find the small word in the big word (e.g., *bathroom*).
- Find the ending or beginning of a word in the main word (e.g., *playing*; *repay*).
- Skip the word and read to the end of the sentence.
- Go back to the beginning of sentence and try again.
- Substitute a word that makes sense. Think about the story, does the word you are using make sense? Does it look right? Does it sound right?
- Link to prior knowledge.
- Predict and anticipate what could come next.
- Read the passage several times for fluency and meaning.
- Write words you can't figure out and need to know on Post-its.
- Read the word without the vowels.

## **Highlights of Research on Resiliency**

**T**he concepts of resilience and protective factors are the positive counterparts to the constructs of vulnerability and risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilient children, called “keepers of the dream” by Garmezy (1991), are children who remain competent despite exposure to misfortune or to stressful events (Rutter, 1985). Characteristics of resilient children include (Demos, 1989):

- A sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, which allows the child to cope successfully with challenges
- An active stance toward an obstacle or difficulty
- The ability to see a difficulty as a problem that can be worked on, overcome, changed, endured, or resolved in some way
- Reasonable persistence, with an ability to know when “enough is enough”
- A capacity to develop a range of strategies and skills to bear on the problem, which can be used in a flexible way

No children, however, are invulnerable to the stress of diversity (Rutter, 1985):

- The resistance to stress is relative.
- The basis of the resistance is both environmental and constitutional.
- The degree of resistance is not a fixed quantity; it varies over time and according to circumstances.
- Risk increases substantially when children experience two risk factors and continues to increase as the number of risk

factors increases (Rutter, 1985). The more risk factors are present, the greater the damaging impact of each.

- Poverty is usually not one risk factor; rather it is a constellation of interacting risk factors (Schorr, 1987).

Schools, Benard (1995) points out, have become a vital refuge for a growing number of children, “serving as a protective shield to help children withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world” (Garmezy, 1991). Benard (1993) has identified three key features of families, schools, and communities that have protected children growing up in adversity: caring and support; positive expectations; and ongoing opportunities for participation.

In a longitudinal study of a multiracial cohort of 698 infants on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Werner and Smith (1992) identified children who, despite multiple risk factors, were able to lead productive lives, exhibiting competence, confidence, and caring. One of the key protective factors for these children was the availability of persons who provided them with a secure base for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative. Among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of the children of Kauai, outside of the family circle, was a favorite teacher. For the resilient youngsters, a special teacher was not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification.

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